

“Superwomen”  
and the Function of Ancient Myths and  
Archetypal Images in American Popular  
Television at the Turn of the Millennium:  
*Xena: Warrior Princess, Buffy the Vampire  
Slayer and Witchblade*

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## Chapter 1 : Introduction

*“In a time of ancient gods, warlords and kings. A land in turmoil cried out for a hero. She was Xena, a mighty princess forged in the heat of battle. The power, the passion, the danger. Her courage will change the world””<sup>1</sup>*

A young woman kneels next to a dead man on the hardwood floor of a theatre stage. She looks up into the face of a slick Italian gangster type who is pointing a gun at her head and challenges him: “Just do it, Gallo. Why don't you kill me and get it over with?” To which Gallo overly dramatically replies “Arrividerci. Bella,” and shoots. Now the audience witnesses something close to a miracle. The woman brings up her right arm in front of her face, as if to shield herself from the anticipated assault. On her right wrist she is wearing a thin silver bracelet with a large, red oval-shaped stone set in. Suddenly, the bracelet transforms itself into a metal gauntlet, quite like the armor of a medieval knight. The bullet approaching the woman's head in slow motion now, harmlessly bounces off the shiny surface of the glove. This is the beginning of a carefully choreographed fight scene, fast paced, with many quick cuts, flickering lights and thrumming rock music, not unlike any generic rock music video. Some of the gangsters attack the woman while their boss Gallo makes a quiet exit through a back door of the theatre. The whole scene has a somewhat surreal appeal as much of the action can only be seen as a shadow play against a huge white screen hanging from the ceiling. Observing the shadows we can see that the woman is no longer simply shielding herself against the spray of bullets, but the gauntlet has miraculously developed a blade with which she proceeds to immobilize all of her assailants. Eventually she is the last person standing, quite lost, on the stage, hoarsely calling out the name of the criminal who so cowardly has left the scene.<sup>2</sup>

This is one of the first fight scenes from the pilot episode of the series *Witchblade* which went on the air in 2000. The hero of the show, Sara Pezzini, a New York police detective fights criminals with the help of a mysterious magical artifact, the Witchblade. Sara

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<sup>1</sup> Main credits of *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

<sup>2</sup> *Witchblade*, Pilot Episode (Pilot Episode). Throughout this work MLA in-text citation for individual episodes will be used, giving the title of the episode. As the sequence of individual episodes, or their location within the series, are important for this study, I will also provide the information for the season from which an episode is taken, as well as the episode number. For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, episode one of season number four, titled “The Freshman,” will be referred to as: “The Freshman” (4.01).

Pezzini and the show *Witchblade* are exemplary for a very particular type of television series in three respects. Firstly, they introduce us to a very specific and relatively recent (starting in the mid-1990s), popular type of film/TV protagonist: the female action hero.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, they illustrate an increasing fascination with the supernatural and mythical in contemporary Western, especially American, culture and society. And, thirdly they combine the image of the warrior woman, who transcends traditional gender roles, with a background of myth and mystery. This is a trend which can be observed in an increasing number of television shows (and motion pictures) over the past two decades. It is also highly interesting to see that the protagonists of these shows, physically and intellectually strong women, often equipped with supernatural powers, are not only very popular but apparently easily accepted by American audiences, as e.g. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* both had constant high ratings and kept running for seven and six years respectively. Furthermore, they have had a long-term impact on American television history. Both shows continue to be referenced not only by critics of a variety of academic fields, but also by other television shows, for example in the episode “Desperately Xeeing Xena” (11.04) of the *Simpsons* (1989-), where the animated actress Lucy Lawless, dressed in her Xena costume, rescues Bart and Lisa Simpson from the clutches of the Comic Book Guy.

If we consider that such a growing number of television series are based on the premise of a strong, athletic, intelligent, and, of course, always attractive woman with supernatural powers who fights and overcomes supernatural or quite mundane enemies, the question arises why this particular type of program has become so popular in a relatively short time. My thesis is that the attractiveness and popularity of the female action (super-) hero as an appreciated television protagonist lies in a particularly successful formula which connects the past and the present of Western, especially American, culture. Therefore, in this study I will argue that many American television shows, featuring female action heroes and incorporating supernatural elements are immensely popular with audiences in the U.S. and all over the world, because they employ a variety of mythological texts, symbols and archetypes, which they adapt from their original contexts to refer to distinctly American issues, ideas and values. By including ancient myths, stories, symbols and motifs, as well as historical events and personalities, into contemporary American television narratives,

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this study I will use “female action hero” instead of “heroines,” since one of the aims of this work is to show that there are almost no distinctions in the construction of contemporary male and female action heroes in American television shows with supernatural and mythological paradigms.

the creators of these shows facilitate a blurring of factual and fictional elements to propagate current discussions of American norms and ideologies.

My second argument is that, apart from the sources and the Americanization of these myths and archetypes, their use in selected television shows contributes to a revision of gender roles. It is obvious that over the past 50 years or so, the image of women in television series has changed dramatically.<sup>4</sup> We can observe that traditional gender roles are often questioned and alternative concepts presented. Traditionally, women in moving pictures have been assigned the role of emotional support for the male hero. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* we see a reversal of this concept. Here, Xander Harris, one of Buffy's best friends and part of the tight-knit group of people to support the Slayer, is identified as "the heart" of the group.<sup>5</sup> Though Xander does not possess any supernatural powers, his role in the team is nevertheless crucial. Xander's task is to lend emotional support to his friends and thus keep them anchored in society. Because he is brave enough to show his emotional ties to his friends, Xander Harris even saves the world from ultimate destruction.<sup>6</sup> However, instead of comparing traditional notions of gender roles with more modern ones, I would like to illuminate *how* men and women are constructed in particular television series today, and the numerous alternative approaches series can take to develop a character's identity, including, but not limited to, gender identity. My view will not so much be focused on the binary differences of "male" and "female", but on transcending narrow, and possibly even outmoded, terms.<sup>7</sup>

A third aim of this study is to show that, even if settings, stories and motifs may be taken from ancient mythology, the TV programs are still distinctly American. This Americanness of the programs is evident from their frame of reference which is always related to American history, culture and society. Deeply rooted in the narratives are American myths like the American Dream, the Frontier, Progress, Individualism and the discussion of their present-day meaning. Moreover, intertextual references confirm close ties to American popular culture and facilitate audience identification.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the

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<sup>4</sup> A more detailed history of female action heroes in American television will follow in chapters 2.3 and 3.1.

<sup>5</sup> "Primeval" (4.21).

<sup>6</sup> "Grave" (6.22).

<sup>7</sup> More on this in chapters 2.3 and 3.1.

<sup>8</sup> Pop culture references in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are more than obvious, and highly appreciated by the audience. For example, in the episode "The Freshman" (4.01) Willow, Buffy's best friend, says to Giles, who is Buffy's official Watcher and mentor: "Are you saying that Buffy's been doing a Linda Blair on us because Kathy's been sucking her soul?" Which is, of course, a reference to the *Exorcist* films, featuring the actress Linda Blair as a young woman possessed by a demon. The episode "School Hard" (2.03) has the vampire Spike confronting his vampiric creator Angel: "You were my sire, man. You were my Yoda." Again, an

shows pick up on current social and political problems prominent in many Western countries, e.g. single parenting, motherhood, sexual orientation or substance abuse. But again, the ways of dealing with these problems demonstrate American ideologies and a certain set of value systems.

### Frame of Work

In order to give this study a manageable size and frame I am going to concentrate my research on three American television shows from the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001, hereafter *XWP*,) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003, hereafter *BtVS*,) and *Witchblade* (2001-2002, hereafter *WB*).<sup>9</sup> These three shows emphasize the mythological and supernatural in their respective narratives. Moreover, the protagonists of the series are exemplary for the category of “warrior women,” in which they can be said to transcend traditional gender roles and embody new ideas of what a woman in contemporary society<sup>10</sup> is capable of. Each of the three women possesses supernatural powers in one form or another. Xena of *XWP*, formerly known as “The Destroyer of Nations,” is a Chosen and Favorite of the Greek God of War, Ares. As Ares’ personal protégé, Xena has not only been given careful training and tutoring, but also accelerated focus, strength, agility and intelligence. Xena’s trademark weapon, the famous Chakram, is imbued with magical powers. Buffy Summers, the protagonist of *BtVS*, is the latest in a long line of Slayers.<sup>11</sup> At some point in the ancient past, a group of (male) magicians decided to create a fierce warrior to battle demons and protect humanity.<sup>12</sup> In order to do so they bestowed superhuman physical powers, dexterity and a “sixth sense” for demons and dangers upon their creation. Still, both Xena and Buffy have to train their physical and

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evident allusion to the *Star Wars* movies, which are very popular all over the world. As a matter of fact, the language used in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, with its word plays and pop culture references, has been extensively researched and entertainingly examined by Michael Adam in his book *Slayer Slang: A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Lexicon*.

<sup>9</sup> The female protagonists in the selected shows are not very diverse in that they are white, middle-class Americans (or at least representing middle-class Americans in the case of Xena). Vivian Chin has discussed the lack of ethnic diversity in *BtVS* in her essay “Buffy? She’s Like Me, She’s not Like Me – She’s Rad”. Another article which examines race in *BtVS* is Lynn Edwards “Slaying in Black and White: Kendra as Tragic Mulatta in *Buffy*.”

<sup>10</sup> Although *XWP* is set in the times of ancient Greece and Rome, the narratives are clearly part of contemporary negotiations of American issues, as will be shown throughout this study.

<sup>11</sup> At least this is the case when the narrative starts in the first season. During the course of the show Buffy dies twice and both times a new Slayer is activated. According to the show’s mythology, an unknown number of potential Slayers are trained all over the world to take over in the event of the current Slayer’s death.

<sup>12</sup> This is explained in *BtVS* “Restless” (4.22).

mental powers regularly to stay fit, strong and sharp, and to be able to overcome their enemies.

At first glance, *WB*'s Sara Pezzini seems like a rather average, though physically and professionally well trained, police woman. However, when she comes into the possession of a magical artifact called "the Witchblade," Pezzini is given supernatural powers to combat the worldly and otherworldly forces of evil.

The selected shows in this study, *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*, combine classical mythology with modern American ideas of social and cultural norms. *XWP* is set against a backdrop of Greek and Roman mythology. As the series progresses, it becomes a study in comparative religion: myths and stories, as well as religious ideas from a variety of Western and Eastern cultures, e.g., Ireland, China, Scandinavia and India are included. The mythological universe of *BtVS* has been created for the show especially. Though some of the main components have obviously been taken from Celtic, Slavic and Christian mythology, with a sprinkling of Native American and Aboriginal motifs, the producers of *Buffy* have created a very distinctive universe for their characters where vampires and demons are as common as cheerleaders and fast food restaurants. *WB* features an amalgamation of mythological characters and stories. As Sara Pezzini is the latest in an extensive succession of wielders of the Witchblade, her "ancestors" are women like Cleopatra, Boudica or Joan of Arc. Female heroes from different parts of Eastern and Western mythology have found a place within the show, and their individual legends become significant components for the show's unique cosmos.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, *WB* combines Christian and Eastern mythology with very contemporary cultural and social movements.

The popularity of the shows and the impact of *XWP* and *BtVS* on American popular culture have been very distinctive. *XWP* ran for six years with 24 episodes in the first and 22 episodes in each of the following five seasons, *BtVS* had a seven year run with 12 episodes in the first, and 22 episodes each in all other seasons. In contrast to *WB*, which only made it to two seasons of 13 episodes each, *XWP* and *BtVS* have had a huge impact on contemporary television culture. Both shows are still present in syndicated television all around the world, where one can watch reruns of the series more or less constantly. More importantly, however, all three productions very quickly gained a cult status among

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<sup>13</sup> On the official website for *WB* the "legacy" of the different wielders is disclosed. 18 wielders are mentioned and their stories explained; starting in 500 B.C. with an Amazon queen called Myrene, leading all the way up to the contemporary wielder, Sara Pezzini in the year 2000 A.D. Another article on the website deals with the "mythology" of the Witchblade, and gives the reader some background on where the Witchblade presumably came from, who fashioned it, etc.



American (and international) audiences which shows that “these series appeal not only to the ‘average’ audience member but also to a particular focused and motivated group of people to whom the series speak deeply” (Heinecken 5). Evidence of this cult appeal is a huge collection of fan based art and fan fiction, discussion groups and fan clubs on the Internet, as well as a continuing inclusion of these shows in gender, cultural, and media criticism. One does not have to go any further than a quick check on Wikipedia to find an extensive article dedicated to “Buffy Studies” where it is said that this particular type of research has become a “subset of the academic field of cultural studies” (Wikipedia, “Buffy Studies”) with regular scholarly meetings and publications, e.g., in the online journal *Slayage*. Considering the fact that there have been a number of conferences with *BtVS* as their focal point, the idea that an academic discipline “Buffy Studies” indeed exists seems not too far-fetched. *XWP* has a number of, mostly online, “research centers,” the most prominent of which is *Whoosh!*, the fan based *Center for Xena Studies*, where fans and scholars from different academic fields examine various topics from the show. Aside from their prominence in online criticism, articles on *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB* can be found in a number of magazines and books concerning gender or cultural studies.<sup>14</sup> Both *XWP*, and even more *BtVS*, continue to be highly popular topics at academic conferences.<sup>15</sup> *WB*, based on the Top Cow Comic books created by Marc Silvestri and Michael Turner, had already reached cult status before the television series was produced but gained even more fans after the show was aired on TNT. Even though *WB* might not have had such an impact on mainstream popular culture, and has not generated as many critical essays as the other two shows, I find that it is especially suitable for research because of its unique style in presenting mythologically suffused narratives. Sequences are shot at a very fast pace, with a rapid succession of cuts, almost psychedelic colors and pushing rock music, thus contributing to the disorientation of the viewer. With this high-speed type of filmic arrangement the producers manage to illustrate a particular lifestyle very common to the U.S. and other Western countries: the “faster, higher, better” society, in which most of us live at present. This type of society often moves too quickly for everyone to catch up with and some may even feel completely lost. The stark dichotomy between today’s hectic life,

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<sup>14</sup> Searching the MLA International Bibliography (August 2010) one can find 81 references for *BtVS*, 12 for *XWP* but, unfortunately, none for *Witchblade*.

<sup>15</sup> *BtVS* has been a regular subject area of the annual PCA/ACA conferences for some years now. At the 2009 conference, for example, the subject area dedicated to Buffy Studies, offered papers by more than 50 presenters during three days of panels. In 2011, still, a subchair was devoted to *BtVS*, 8 years after the official end of the series.

and the timelessness of magic and mysticism, is more apparent in *WB* than many other contemporary TV shows. Therefore, *WB* will not only be a good source in examining a warrior woman with supernatural powers, but it will also allow us to incorporate a different angle, concerning stylistic devices, on American culture and society than the more traditionally produced *BtVS* or *XWP*.

### A Word on Scholarship

Academic research and writing on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has become something of a trend since the early 2000s.<sup>16</sup> Several collections of essays have been published, examining *BtVS* from different angles. In Rhonda Wilcox's *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2005), contributions illustrate *BtVS* and the use of music, *BtVS* as visual art, as a literary text with references to Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, or T.S. Eliot, as well as John Campbell's monomyth. Indeed, several articles have examined in greater or lesser detail how Buffy can be read as Campbell's archetypal hero.<sup>17</sup> Julie Sloan Brannon, for example, uses theoretical constructs from Campbell and Foucault to trace Buffy's quest for Self in her article "'It's About Power': Buffy, Foucault, and the Quest for Self."

That *BtVS* is not simply a transitory popular culture phenomenon is discussed in a collection of essays, edited by James South, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale* (2003). The contributing writers find connections to classical philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, or Nietzsche, provide a feminist point of view, consider religion and politics as well as moral implications that the series might discuss. Aside from these and many other critical articles that are primarily concerned with the narrative content of *BtVS*, Michael Adams has developed a socio-linguistic dictionary called *Slayer Slang: A Buffy the Vampire Lexicon* (2004). In this lexicon he examines the unique blend of American slang, pop-culture references, and youth culture which have become part of "Buffy-Speak."

Not quite as much has yet been said about *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Several essays have been published in Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy's *Athena's Daughters: Television's New Women Warriors* (2003) which takes a closer look at female action

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<sup>16</sup> For more insight into this phenomenon see David Lavery's article "'I wrote my thesis on you': Buffy Studies as an Academic Cult" in the online magazine *Slayage*.

<sup>17</sup> In her article "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Greek Hero Revisited*," Laurel Bowman shortly mentions how Buffy goes through the three phases of departure, initiation, and return which Campbell interprets as major stages in the archetypal hero's journey. Sofrina Hinton discusses Jung's concept of the Self using Campbell's theories in her "Confluence: The Quest for Self in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." Unfortunately, this article is no longer accessible (February 2013).

heroes in *BtVS*, *XWP*, *La Femme Nikita* (1997-2001), and *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001). In Sherrie A. Inness's *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, some essays deal with the characters of Xena and Buffy. One essay in that collection discusses *Witchblade*,<sup>18</sup> making it one of the very few critical texts on this particular television show.

Among the wide variety of topics concerning *BtVS* or *XWP* there have been relatively few articles examining the function of a particular archetype or a particular myth. One of those few is Nicole Dentzien's article "The Fisher Queen – Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Death and Mythology". Dentzien sees strong connections to the legends of ancient "god-kings" of Celtic or Germanic cultures, who were sacrificed (in effigy) and later "reborn" in complex rituals to provide strength and prosperity to their people (cf. Dentzien). Quite a different approach, regarding the historical and mythological complexities of *XWP*, is used by historian Alison Futrell who examines "The Baby, the Mother, and the Empire: Xena as Ancient Hero." In this essay, Futrell illustrates how history and heroism in *XWP* are primarily looked at from a female perspective, and the importance of mother and motherhood is stressed. She exemplifies this by looking at the episode "The Furies" (3.01) which is quite obviously based on Aeschylus's *The Eumenides*. However, where Aeschylus makes a case for the political power of the father and devaluates "feminine authority in the public and the domestic sphere" (Futrell 17), *XWP* reinterprets and changes the outcome of the story and "catalyzes a strengthening of the mother-daughter relationship to the exclusion of the father" (ibid.) Even when Xena "rewrites" history, for example, in her dealings with the Romans, the focus is not on glorifying particular persons or battles, but "rather the *XWP* narrative emphasizes the consequences of imperialism, the suffering it causes its predominantly domestic and female victims, presenting a persistent subaltern perspective on the Roman Empire" (ibid. 22).

As mentioned above, there have been relatively few critical articles, examining the function and the importance of ancient mythology in *BtVS*, or *XWP*; and practically none on *WB*. So far there has been no extensive work focusing exclusively on the use and the function of ancient myths and archetypes in either of the television shows mentioned. My study will therefore attempt to fill that gap by not only offering an in-depth analysis of several ancient and modern myths and archetypes used in the three selected television series, but also by comparing the utilization and Americanization of those myths and

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<sup>18</sup> David Greven's "Throwing Down the Gauntlet: Defiant Women, Decadent Men, Objects of Power, and *Witchblade*." 123-151.

archetypes, in order to determine whether archetypes and mythological themes are used as a particular strategy by television creators to mediate specific norms and values and to change contemporary images of gender.

### **A Word on Gender**

The fact that today's action heroes can easily be female or male, invariably leads to the question of gender roles. Are warrior women more masculine if they use violence? Which – if any – roles do sex and gender play in the depiction of female heroes? How much variety in gender representations is there on the selected contemporary television shows?

As far back as the 1980s, feminist scholars started to extensively discuss the meaning of terms such as sex/gender, man/woman, male/female, and tried to find a way to overcome centuries-old traditions of thinking about gender roles and behavior. Sociologist and literary critic Julia Kristeva came to the conclusion that “the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to metaphysics” (“Women's Time” 34). With this statement Kristeva already hints at the arbitrariness of the allegedly binary and highly competitive concepts of “man” and “woman” which were then normative in Western societies.<sup>19</sup> The idea that notions of individual identity and gender are performative and culturally constructed has become very much identified with the theories of feminist scholar Judith Butler and her challenging book *Gender Trouble* (1989). According to Butler, gender identity is never an entirely fixed status, but always something a person does at a particular time and in a particular situation:

In other words, acts, gestures and desire produce the effect on an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (185)

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<sup>19</sup> That science fiction and fantastic-mythological texts provide fertile ground to discuss gender has been examined by Dana Haraway in the early 1990s. In her widely received “Cyborg Manifesto” (1991) Haraway also makes a strong case for the outdatedness of a dualist notion of gender, using the metaphor of the cyborg to discuss the negotiability of power structures.

Similar to this concept is Butler's view on gender, particularly on women. If the word "woman" can no longer be seen as a general expression to refer to a biological condition, "it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a construction that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 43). Consequently, if the term *woman* is up to constant shifting, so must be the term *man*.

In later works, such as *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), or *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler reaffirms the performativity of gender in constantly shifting social norms and environments, emphasizing that "gender now also means gender identity, a particular salient issue in the politics and theory of transgenderism and transsexuality" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 6).<sup>20</sup>

Queer theory has also added much to the rethinking of gender representation in culture and society, speaking out against a binary construction of gender:

Because the binaries are revealed to be cultural constructions or ideological fictions, the reality of sexed bodies and gender and sexual identities are fraught with incoherence and instability. In other words, these binaries incompletely or imperfectly represent a broad range of complicated social processes surrounding the meaning of bodies and the social cues, practices, and subjectivities associated with gender and sexuality. (Valocchi 752 f.)

Modern American television series have adapted to this changed perception of gender performativity inasmuch as audiences expect both women and men to be treated in a similar way. For example, a police procedural drama, such as the *CSI*<sup>21</sup> series will show women and men working side by side, performing the same professional and physical detection work. As a matter of fact, audiences today do expect men and women to be equals and would be irritated if this was different for no apparent reason (cf. Gauntlett 6).

Of course, there are biological markers which construct gender up to a certain point. However, these markers and their perceived connotations are subject of discussion as well. In *WB*, Sara and her partner Jake are investigating the murder of a gay man (cf. "Diplopia" 1.03). In order to gain easy access to the club where the victim used to go, Sara dresses up

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<sup>20</sup> Feminist theory, especially Butler's work will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.3 on reconstruction of gender.

<sup>21</sup> *CSI: Crime Scene Investigations* (2000 - ), *CSI: Miami* (2002 -), or *CSI: New York* (2004 - ) have been extremely popular on American television for more than a decade now.

as a man. Once inside the club, to hide their faces from a suspect, Sara kisses Jake, even though her partner squeals uncomfortably “Pez, you’re a guy” (ibid.) Whereas instances of cross-dressing are nothing new on American television screens, and are often employed to invoke comical situations, *WB* uses this opportunity to illuminate questions of gender construction, homophobia, and sexual identity.

Gender construction, performativity and identity are issues which I would like to pay closer attention to in the course of this study. I will concentrate on how the characters of the female protagonists and their male colleagues and companions are created in *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*, with a particular focus on how these gender constructions are informed by gender as a performative cultural expression.

### **A Word on the Relation of Myth and Television**

Television shows dealing with mythological topics and supernatural events have not suddenly appeared on American television. If we think about popular shows containing supernatural elements, we can go back as far as the 1950s (*Twilight Zone*, 1959-1964) and 1960s (*The Outer Limits*, 1963-1965). However, since the 1990s the number of American television shows dealing with the supernatural, the mythical and mysterious, has grown immensely. The show that re-started the vogue of creating narratives deeply rooted in myth and the paranormal was undoubtedly *The X-Files* (1994-2003). Soon shows, such as *Psi-Factor* (1996-2000), *Profiler* (1996-2000), *Poltergeist – the Legacy* (1996-1999) and many more, flooded American network and cable channels. Notably, in most of these programs we encounter intellectually and/or physically strong women who are on equal footing with their male co-stars. In *The X-Files* for example, FBI agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder are teamed up to investigate events that are hard to explain by strictly scientific reasoning. Both agents encounter a number of strange and monstrous entities, humanoid or otherwise, evil, and not so evil, spirits, or different alien races. They become mixed up in government conspiracies and, more often than not, come up with almost unbelievable explanations for the situations they have been through. In all of this Scully and Mulder each have their individual strengths and weaknesses, but neither of the partners is evidently stronger (not necessarily in a purely physical way but in terms of professional expertise and behavior), more clever or important in general. The show ran for nine seasons, has been shown in many different countries and has reached the status of a cult series with millions of fans all over the world.

Aside from the professional and personal relationship of the two main protagonists, the main attraction for most viewers lies with the supernatural, the mysterious, and the unexplainable. Often *The X-Files* feature mythological creatures such as Bigfoot<sup>22</sup> or Vampires,<sup>23</sup> or take on religious phenomena such as a boy who is a faith healer,<sup>24</sup> or a Voodoo Priest in a refugee camp where a number of people have mysteriously been killed.<sup>25</sup> But also urban myths, like a computer which develops an artificial intelligence and starts killing people because they are trying to shut it down,<sup>26</sup> are part of this series.

Mythology, be it in form of ancient heroes, monsters, ghosts or UFOs and aliens, holds a special attraction for many people. But why are audiences so fascinated by these supernatural narratives?

Perhaps the most obvious explanations for these questions can be found in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis. The founder of modern psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, and his equally influential disciple and colleague, C.G. Jung, have worked extensively on myths and myth analysis. Both scientists have used dream analysis to approach the wide field of mythology. Freud, but even more so Jung, use dream interpretation as an instrument to gain knowledge of a particular person and their environment at a specific time. Using his theories of the composition of the human psyche, consisting of id, ego, and super ego, Freud analyzes the dreams of his clients in order to help them understand problems and neuroses, and subsequently deal with them. Freud's primary concern is the unconscious world of an individual and to find out how this world represents the struggles of the conscious mind. According to Freud, any individual who must, or wishes to, function in a complex society, has to learn how to repress certain desires which might disturb the written and/or unwritten rules of his/her society. Consequently, he/she needs to find a different outlet for those wishes, e.g. creativity or fantasy:

The norms of public activity and public behavior are internalized as the reality principle. But the degree of social repression even in healthy individuals would be intolerably high, if some activities were not left free from its dominion. It is above all in fantasy and daydreams that ordinary individuals find relief from the constraints of the reality principle, and this creative activity of the mind often finds social expression in art and literature, which, though subject to censorship, are normally far

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<sup>22</sup> "The Jersey Devil" (1.05)

<sup>23</sup> "3" (2.07) or "Bad Blood" (5.12)

<sup>24</sup> "Miracle Man" (1.18)

<sup>25</sup> "Fresh Bones" (2.15)

<sup>26</sup> "Ghost in the Machine" (1.07)

less regulated than other public actions. In short, repression is an agency of culture and committed to the reality principle; fantasy is an individual expression of allegiance to the pleasure principle. (Csapo 92-3)

In Jungian theory, dreams also have compensatory functions: “As manifestations of the activity of the unconscious part of the mind, dreams balance the one-sided activities and attitudes of ego-consciousness” (Walker 19). However, Jung considered Freud’s approach to dream analysis to be too clinical and narrow: “There is no foundation for saying that dreams merely contain repressed wishes whose moral incompatibility requires them to be disguised by a hypothetical dream-censor” (Campbell, *Portable Jung* 308). For Jung, dreams are only one expression of a person’s unconscious. The personal unconscious is always part of something bigger: the collective unconscious. In his lecture “Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry,” Jung compares dreams to a work of art which has its origin in an unconscious outburst of creativity. He then uses this image of a work of art to explain how the personal and collective unconscious are related:

I am assuming that the work of art we propose to analyze, as well as being symbolic, has its source not in the personal unconscious of the poet, but in the sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind. I have called this sphere the collective unconscious to distinguish it from the personal unconscious [...] The collective unconscious is not to be thought of as a self-subsistent entity; it is no more than a potentiality handed down to us from primordial times in the specific form of mnemonic images or inherited in the anatomical structure of the brain [...] They appear only in the shaped material of art as the regulative principles that shape it; that is to say, only by inferences drawn from the finished work can we reconstruct the age-old original of the primordial image. The primordial image, or archetype, is a figure – be it a daemon [sic.], a human being, or a process – that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed. Essentially, therefore, it is a mythological figure. (Campbell, *Portable Jung* 318 f.)

Thus, according to Jung, dreams and myths are closely related, as both are representations of the unconscious. Though the dream may have a stronger focus on the individual, it can never be separated from myth, which is a manifestation of the collective unconscious. Still, dream and myth are not necessarily interchangeable, as Jung points out:



Strictly speaking, a myth is a historical document. It is told, it is recorded, but it is not in itself a dream. It is the product of an unconscious process in a particular social group, at a particular time, at a particular place. This unconscious process can naturally be equated with a dream. Hence anyone who ‘mythologizes,’ that is, tells myths, is speaking out of this dream and what is then retold or actually recorded in the myth. But you cannot, strictly speaking, properly take the myth as a unique historical event like a dream, an individual dream which has its place in a time sequence; you can do that only *grosso modo*. You can say that at a particular place, at a particular time, a particular social group was caught up in such a process. (Jung, qt. in Walker 91)

This interconnectedness between a social group, a society and myth is clearly occurring in numerous modern American television shows and thus marks a crucial point for my study.

Like Freud, Jung believed myths to be a form of compensation. In a modern world, which Jung perceived as struggling to balance high rationality with existential *angst*, where social values and the meaning of life were becoming increasingly diluted, myths offered explanations and guidance for the life of the individual and society. In order to observe how a society or a culture functions, Jung thus created the idea of the “archetype.”<sup>27</sup> According to Jung and Jungian scholars, these archetypes can be recognized in a multitude of different situations and agents in the everyday communication of a group of people, a society or culture:

Myths are essentially culturally elaborated representations of the contents of the deepest recesses of the human psyche: the world of the archetypes. Myths represent the unconscious archetypal, instinctual structures of the mind. They represent these structures not in a historical and cultural vacuum but rather as they are culturally elaborated and expressed in terms of the world view of a particular age and culture. (Walker 4)

Though both Freud and Jung agree that myths can work as an outlet for repressed wishes and compensation for the trials of life, myth and mythology should not be understood as a form of escapism, but as a tool used by cultures to re-examine values and belief systems, behavior norms and the role of society. The familiarity with different myths and

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<sup>27</sup> A more detailed examination of “archetypes” will follow in the next chapter.

mythologies supports the accessibility and adaptability of topics to our contemporary world. Greek and Roman, Celtic and Nordic myths, as well as the stories of the Christian Bible, are considered the roots of our Western civilization. Consequently, most people living in a culture influenced by either or all of these mythologies will have an inherent understanding of the stories connected to them and the ability to recognize or even transfer this understanding into a modern environment. So, if we understand myth as a repression-free zone which provides us with balance for our science-dominated life, and as a device to find answers as to why our culture is the way it is, we start to understand why the supernatural and mythical holds so much fascination with modern-day audiences.

Since the term “myth” in itself is as complex as the functions of myth in Western culture and society, it is necessary to define the meaning of “myth” for the context of this work.

The term “myth,” as any textbook is quick to explain, derives from the Greek *μῦθος* and originally means “words,” or in a broader sense “story” (Rose 1). Whether or not these words or stories are fact or fiction is irrelevant. A myth usually is one tale or story in a complex fabric of tales which, taken together, function as part of a “mythology.” Today, however, the meaning of myth is slightly more varied.<sup>28</sup> One of the most effective approaches towards a definition can be found in Csapo’s *Theories of Mythology*, where he states that “myth might be more usefully defined as a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance” (9). If we adopt this definition of myth, we still need to delineate the area in which this definition will be used. To quote Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye: “The word myth is used in such a bewildering variety of contexts that anyone talking about it has to say first of all what his chosen context is” (“The Koine of Myth” 171). Primarily, my chosen context for this study is literary criticism. However, considering that I will be examining television shows, the term “text” should be understood as it is commonly used in media studies, where texts can refer to any kind of media material (cf. Gauntlett 16). I will discuss the problems of using literary criticism with audio-visual media, such as television shows, in chapter two.

The television series I am going to examine will provide me with multi-layered texts consisting of images, sound, narrative, etc. Even though images and sounds will be taken into consideration, the primary focus will be on the narratives established in the television

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<sup>28</sup> For a short introduction into different uses of the term see Robert A. Segal’s *Myth*.

shows and finding references to classical (Greek, Roman, Celtic, etc.) myths as well as modern American ones, such as the American Dream, and others. Within the television shows, I am going to analyze archetypes, symbols and motifs that supply evidence of values and norms which are considered socially important and desirable in culture of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century United States of America. Thus I will be able to show that contemporary American television creators have developed very specific ways in which they use mythology in order to negotiate social and cultural problems of the modern United States.

### **Structure of this work**

Following this introduction, chapter two will detail the three academic fields which provide the theoretical and methodological foundations for my study: myth and archetypal criticism, narrative strategies in context with television studies, and gender studies. Examining the abstract background of myth theories and television as a narratological medium, as well as regarding the question of reconstructing gender in film and television, I will outline the dominant frames of reference used in this project.

Since this work is primarily investigating archetypes and myths in their relation to the hero figures of the selected television series, the third chapter will start with observations on the changing functions and features of the action hero in American television over the past few decades. This focus on the figure of the action hero is, of course, owed to the fact that the three selected shows each feature a female action hero as their lead character. In the first part of the third chapter I am going to establish how the hero figure in general is of importance to his/her social and cultural environment, or more particularly, what his/her function is in contemporary Western, especially American society. The second part of this chapter will be devoted to contextualizing the hero figures of *BtVS*, *XWP* and *WB* as archetypal heroes. Based on Campbell's examination of mythological heroes (primarily Campbell's *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*), I will determine whether hero figures of contemporary American television are still created in such a way that they are easily and universally recognizable by Western audiences. Furthermore, I am going to consider if the archetypal hero figure is subject to change once the maleness of the traditional Western hero loses its exclusiveness and women step in as heroes with equal powers.

My close examination and analysis of particular myths and archetypes will begin in chapter four which is dedicated to the archetype of the Self (cf. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, or *Beziehungen*) and American key cultural concepts of individualism and

communitarianism. As the hero figure is most often the primary identification figure for the audience, she functions as the guiding principle through the story arcs of the show which discuss cultural and social anxieties. Following the heroes' narratives, the television shows discuss issues of individuality and community spirit as encountered in the contemporary United States.

The second mythological element under observation in chapter five will be the nemesis figure and the archetype of the Shadow as an antagonist to the hero. As much as the hero needs to determine solutions to problematic situations, the hero's nemesis is regularly the instigator of these problems. Moreover, the antagonist, often a recurring character on a television series, serves as a mirror, or screen, which reflects problematic and uncomfortable traits of the hero. In pitting hero and antagonist against each other, the three series' use the nemesis figure to negotiate notions of justice in the fictional narratives, providing a sounding board for modern American society.

Subsequently, the Myth of Death and Rebirth, which plays an essential part in all three shows, will be investigated in chapter six. Death in Western culture is often a taboo topic. Yet, in mythology, death and rebirth stories are among the most dynamic and optimistic legends. In various story arcs of the selected television series, this optimism translates into the narratives told on the screen. Thus, it is a matter of course to examine narratives of death and rebirth in the three shows in relation to American Optimism.

Though the focus of analysis will be on three particular archetypes and individual cultural concepts, other notions closely connected to American history and culture, such as the American Dream or the Frontier Spirit will be part of the theoretical framework of this study.

A concluding chapter will summarize the findings of this work and deliver an outlook on contemporary trends concerning American social and cultural value systems.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Basis and Methodology

This chapter will provide an overview of the theoretical foundations of the academic fields that are at the heart of this study, such as myth and archetypal criticism, media and television studies, and gender studies. Before discussing the relevance and utilization of the different theories for my study, I would like to clarify my methodological approach to examine the functions of ancient myths and archetypes in *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*.

My primary theoretical references will be taken from the area of myth and archetypal criticism. Especially important for my work are psychoanalytical approaches to myths and archetypes, following concepts originally developed by C.G. Jung. Other aspects will include structuralism, and postindustrial capitalism, to help me establish how mythology is utilized in American television today. I will examine how myths and archetypes are presented and adapted to cater to a contemporary American audience. Concerning this issue, I am going to look at specific values and beliefs that have become part of modern American cultural identity, such as American optimism or notions of law and justice. In order to do so, I will concentrate on individual characters and narratives from selected episodes.

As most of Western mythology is male-centric, my examination of television series with female protagonists will determine if gender changes the conception, the agency, objectives and power of an archetypal hero (cf. Campbell, *Hero*). In this context I will consider, for example, Judith Butler's theories of gender as a constantly shifting concept, performativity and gender identity (cf. *Gender, Bodies, Undoing Gender*).

As already pointed out above, myth and archetypal criticism have primarily been developed as instruments for the analysis of textual sources. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify if and how a television series can be examined as a text. Even though film and television scholars today agree that the term "text" may indeed refer to "any kind of media material, such as a television programme, a film, a magazine, or a website, as well as a more conventional written text such as a book or newspaper" (Gauntlett 16), one needs to be aware of the different layers this type of text comprises. With audio-visual materials, such as television series, the text is made up of images and sounds. These images, the music and the dialogue, create the final product which the audience must then make sense of. For analyzing television programs, television theorist Jonathan Bignell distinguishes the semiotic and the narrative approach (cf. 86 ff.) The semiotic approach draws from the

theories of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and understands images as signs which need to be read and interpreted by an audience who have learned to decode specific signs inherent to the moving images presented on their screens. This approach is extremely useful for quantitative research, if one is interested in developing empirical data of particular and recurring symbols. However, this method is somewhat limited if one is rather more interested in the discourse<sup>29</sup> of a narrative, as narratives consist of a multitude of complex signs which cannot be separated from one another without losing their meaning (ibid. 100 ff.).

The narrative approach allows for a focus on the storytelling aspect of a series. Since this study is concerned with adaptations of mythological narratives, I will therefore concentrate on the stories told in the selected television shows, with a particular stress on dialogue. Of course, images will be a central topic of reference when it comes to the visual construction and presentation of archetypal images. Music, as a supportive and manipulative tool for individual scenes, will also be part of my analysis. The narrative, however, will remain the most significant aspect of my observations because it is primarily in the dynamic storytelling processes that can we observe negotiations of social and cultural anxieties.

In order to comprehensively and effectively study the construction and significance of mythical stories and archetypal figures in the selected television series, I need to combine elements from literary criticism and television analysis. Literary criticism provides aspects of comparative mythology, psychoanalytical and structuralist approaches to myths and archetypes are needed to put a television narrative into a wider context of modern-day American culture. The analysis of the construction of narrative in television, using both images and sounds (including dialogue), is vital to establish how figures and objects are utilized to create meaning which can be understood by a present-day American audience. I would like to refer to this amalgamated approach as “complementary television criticism,” in the sense that it uses tools from a variety of academic fields which are necessary to examine how a visual narrative can be interpreted within a contemporary American social and cultural context. Complementary television criticism is thus capable of bridging the divide between traditional literary theories and modern visual language.

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<sup>29</sup> Bignell distinguishes between story and discourse in the analysis of a narrative: “Story is the set of events which are represented. They could potentially be told in any order (chronologically, or in flashback, for example) and with any emphasis. Discourse is the narrating process which puts the story events in an order, with a shape and direction” (100). As this distinction is not relevant for my study, I will not use this division, but apply the term “narrative” to the events which are shown and the overall context in which the story is set.

Since myth and archetypal criticism are the primary theoretical foundations of this study, I am going to continue with a discussion of the development of this field and those aspects which will be included in my own methodological approach.

## ***2.1 Myth Criticism, Archetypal Criticism and Methodology***

Myth criticism and archetypal criticism are terms that are often used synonymously as the matter they deal with, the background they come from and the scholars involved, are very similar. Generally, myth criticism is understood as the argument that “literary works embody recurrent mythic patterns or archetypes which are fundamentally unaffected by historical change” (Childers and Hentzi 197). However, myth criticism in literary studies is not so much one distinctive approach, but an intricate web of questions dealing with the relationship between myth and literature: “it is perhaps best to think of myth criticism as the locus for a series of complex, if powerfully suggestive, questions” (Reeves 520). Consequently, this means that myth criticism is an incredibly multifaceted theoretical construct, but at the same time, an extremely resourceful instrument for the examination of texts. In this chapter I am going to illustrate some of those theories that are of particular relevance for my study.

### **2.1.1 Comparative Mythology**

Over the past 150 years, numerous scholars have shaped the field of mythology studies, all of them adding their own little – or slightly larger – piece to the puzzle. Serious theoretical engagement with mythology has gone hand in hand with the emergence of anthropology as an academic discipline. What both mythology and anthropology initially had in common was the idea to compare different cultures, languages, myths, rituals, etc., and search for similarities which could then be analyzed. The interest in mythology came from the conviction that, for example, the legends and stories known from ancient Greece or Rome were an important part of the European heritage, which explained their perceived superior status of civilization, and allowed a person to position him- or herself in the modern world. From myths, people believed, one could get a “direct access to mentality and intelligence” (Csapo 14) regarding the origins of their individual cultures.

One of the founders of what would later become known as comparative mythology was F.M. Müller. As the Chair in Comparative Philology at Oxford he worked on Indian myths and was interested in their origins. His primary approach was language, and he tried to find out if, how, and why, words from different languages had the same roots. Subsequently, he drew conclusions as to the relation between the cultures involved. What troubled him greatly, though, was that he found astonishing similarities between the stories of “savage” races and those perceived to be the foundation of European superiority in morals, beliefs,



social structures and normative systems. So if new research showed that “barbarian” cultures which were so entertainingly odd in their backwardness did in fact possess similar structures as the ancient Greeks or Romans, then the superiority of the European races was in danger.<sup>30</sup> Still, the dominance of the European culture remained unquestioned by early comparativists, such as James G. Frazer.

Easily the most famous comparative mythologist, and still read widely today, Frazer believed that myth had developed out of religious rituals. Consequently, he compared myths and rituals from a wide range of cultures in his extensive work *The Golden Bough*. His method was fairly simple and straightforward. Frazer would notice a myth or a rite which seemed unexplainable or simply unusual. Then, the scholar would try to find as many versions of this myth or ritual from as many cultures as possible and compare them. The next step was to find a solution to the problem, or better, an explanation for the peculiar behavior or story. If an answer could be found with which to explain most of the problematic cases, Frazer assumed this to be the correct resolution and applied it to the general problem. Of course, Frazer has been criticized severely for his methods, and rightly so. Critics complained that Frazer was too arbitrary in his choice of examples. They claimed that he had deliberately ignored cases which would have diluted the outcome and accused Frazer of a deplorable gullibility when it came to the sources he drew from. Nevertheless, the comparative approach is an extremely useful tool to perceive connections between otherwise unrelated narratives, and to establish a broader basis for the examination of particular tales. Where Frazer’s comparativism was extremely arbitrary, both in methodology and results, I will use specific aspects of comparative mythology to examine the functions of myths in *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*. My carefully selected sources are taken from three television series and one distinctive cultural background. They have all had perceptible impact on American popular culture and feature extremely similar issues and types of hero figures. Still, the comparative approach allows me to illustrate how specific myths are used to debate problematic social and cultural issues in American society at the turn of the millennium.

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<sup>30</sup> Somewhat similar to this challenge to the perceived cultural superiority of one culture, is a process in American film and television production today. During the 20<sup>th</sup> and in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture, especially in film and television, was dominated by British and American products. The validity of the messages inherent to these moving images (even if they criticized central belief systems) was seldom questioned. However, over the past few decades, this cultural dominance has weakened. For example, Indian Bollywood cinema has become a major player in supplying entertainment to global audiences. The cultural superiority of Western values, morals and culture has become increasingly contested in the area of television productions, as well. This becomes apparent also, when *XWP*, set in ancient Greece, incorporates elements and ideas from Chinese, Indian, Russian, and other cultures into its narratives.

One of the most significant sources for my study comes from another renowned comparatist: Joseph Campbell. Campbell was interested in universal truths which surpassed any particular culture or society (cf. *Hero* vii f.). Similar to Frazer he compared tales from various cultures to find manifestations of these truths. In his classic 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell developed the theory of a monomyth, breaking down myths and stories from a variety of cultures into basic structures. Even though Campbell has been criticized for overly generalizing those patterns he found, his work remains the foremost reference with regard to the construction of an archetypal hero figure in any given culture until today. Concentrating on the journey of the archetypal hero in various tales, Campbell detected patterns that were extremely similar in all the myths he analyzed. Never before had the crucial significance of the hero figure, functioning as a mediator for problems and anxieties of any society, been more clearly defined than in Campbell's work. I am convinced that modern American television heroes today are still very much structured along the patterns which Campbell described. This means that contemporary society uses the same techniques to negotiate and find solutions for problematic conditions as, for example, Greek and Roman cultures did over 2000 years ago. Because of this continuing immutability, Campbell's *Hero* is one of the key references for my study.

However, as Campbell's archetypal hero is always male, I will examine whether the aspect of gender changes the structural composition of the hero figure regarding the female heroes of my selected television programs. I am interested to find out if and what changes when the hero of a myth is no longer exclusively male and if we can still speak of an archetypal hero.

### **2.1.2 Psychology and Archetypal Criticism**

Among the developments in myth criticism, psychology and archetypal criticism have had a huge influence. Indeed, archetypal criticism added a new and important dimension to mythological criticism: the analysis of the individual and collective unconscious. Consequently, psychology, psychoanalysis and archetypal criticism will be some of the central tools to investigate how modern television series can be read by their audiences.

## Freud and Jung

As already mentioned above, Freud was instrumental in changing the perception of the human being as a creature not only with physical requirements, but, just as importantly, with psychological desires and needs. The concept and the terms of the different layers of human consciousness and unconsciousness were quickly accepted and integrated into the understanding of modern society. However, since Freud focused more on the analysis of his patients' dreams (cf. *Traumdeutung*, or *Schriften über Träume und Traumdeutungen*) and less on mythology in general, his theories will not be the focus of this study.

First a student, later a colleague of Freud and a distinguished psychoanalyst in his own right, C.G. Jung can be regarded as the creator of modern archetypal criticism. If Frazer and comparative mythology are commonly seen as one of the pillars of archetypal criticism, then Jung and his depth psychology complete the foundations for this discipline.

I have already mentioned above that Jung understood myths as a culturally elaborated representation of the human psyche. Perhaps the most difficult to grasp, yet most enlightening of Jung's concepts, is that of the collective unconscious.

Jungian theory distinguishes two types of the unconscious, the personal and the collective. In the personal unconscious, all the repressed memories of an individual are stored and may be retrieved by therapy. The collective unconscious, however, according to Jungian scholars, is:

a racial memory, consisting of 'primordial images' or archetypes. These find expression in characteristic focus – the Earth Mother, the divine child, the wise old man ... which provide the primordial elements in the myths and narrative constructions of widely different cultures. (Reeves 521)

Jung believes that, since all human beings have the same basic life experiences, e.g., birth, death, seasons, night, day, etc., as well as similar questions concerning the origin of life, the purpose of life or what happens after people die, they have common psychological impulses in response to these queries. Consequently, people respond to particular archetypes and archetypal situations on an unconscious level, which is common to any culture or society:

So it is not surprising that when an archetypal situation occurs we suddenly feel an extraordinary sense of release, as though transported, or caught up by an overwhelming power. At such moments we are no longer individual, but the race; the voice of all mankind resounds in us. (Campbell, *Portable Jung* 320)

The notion that certain archetypes are deeply rooted in the culture of a particular society will actually be one of the foundations of my research. But what exactly is an archetype according to Jung?

Jung took the term archetype from the Greek *arche*, meaning original and *typos*, meaning form, to describe what he believed were symbolic manifestations of instincts in the form of fantasies (cf. Walker 6). To give an example of what is meant by this: A person perceiving herself in great danger may send a prayer to the heavens above, whether or not she actually believes in the existence of gods or supernatural forces. However, with this behavior she instinctually acknowledges the existence of the archetype of a “helpful divine being” that might have the power to aid her in a problematic situation.

Two terms that are often used in context with studies involving archetypes are “archetype” and “archetypal image.” Usually, both terms are used synonymously, which can be rather confusing. Even though Jung and Jungian scholars have used these terms interchangeably, they can and should be distinguished. An archetype is a basic principle of a situation, an idea or a person. Archetypes are as numerous as there are human interactions. However, since they are purely theoretical, even metaphysical constructs, they cannot be represented in their essence. What can be represented and experienced, however, is the archetypal image that is based on a particular archetype: “One archetype can produce an indefinite number of archetypal images, which may be said to be ‘visualizations’ or ‘personifications’ of that archetype” (Walker 14).

Because these archetypal images are perpetually reproduced in any given context, they remain constantly up-to-date and are easily adapted to new developments in any society or culture. Jung has described this process of representing an archetypal image, adapted to fit into a particular time and place, in the context of art:

The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the form in which the age is most lacking (Campbell, *Portable Jung* 321).

The transformation of the unconscious archetype into a tangible, contemporary image also includes the infusion of this image with reflections of present value systems:

The artist seizes on this image, and in raising it from deepest unconsciousness he brings it into relation with conscious values, thereby transforming it until it can be accepted by the minds of his contemporaries according to their powers. (ibid. 321f.)

Archetypal images can often be found in mythological texts. As a matter of fact, Jung called mythology “the textbook of the archetypes” and said that in mythology the unconscious psyche “is not rationally elucidated and explained, but simply represented like a picture or a story book” (Jung, *Zarathustra*, I 24. qt. in Walker 17). Consequently, contemporary television series, especially when they consciously include mythological concepts in their premises, are like the “art” Jung talks about. They take archetypes and translate them into modern images which can be understood by audiences from a variety of cultures. Of special interest to my study is the way in which these shows use images and narration to convey present values or beliefs which may, or may not be, negotiated by the viewers.

I think that television series are uniquely suited to employ archetypal images for the discussion of modern-day problems in society and culture. Audiences have more time to identify or to connect with specific characters and their individual narratives in series than, for example, in feature films. Thus the viewers tend to form deeper bonds to archetypal images inherent in the characters and the situations depicted in the programs<sup>31</sup> and are more likely to translate problems seen on the screen into the wider context of society as a whole:

Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he entralls and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring. He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, and evokes in us all those beneficent forces that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find a refuge from every peril and outlive the longest night. (Campbell, *Portable Jung* 321)

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<sup>31</sup> Naturally, a strong emotional connection to the audience facilitates manipulation of the viewer on an unconscious level. However, as I will examine in chapter 2.2, contemporary audiences tend to be relatively aware of manipulative methods employed by television creators and often engage with them on an interactive level.

Hence, in this work I will look for representations of archetypes, such as the hero (conflicted, unwilling, accidental or otherwise) or the Shadow, and analyze their functions. The notion that myths hold a multitude of archetypes which can reveal much about the concerns, structures and beliefs of a society will be adopted in this study. However, whereas Jung primarily considered the collective unconscious and psychological origins of archetypes, I am mainly interested in their represented aspects, i.e., how archetypal images are constructed and what their function and effect is in a particular context.

### **Northrop Frye**

The study of archetypes in the field of literary studies was advanced by Canadian literary and myth critic Northrop Frye in the late 1950s. He felt that it was time for a new type of literary criticism which would establish a comprehensive system that was universally adaptable: “I suggest that what is at present missing from literary criticism is a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole” (*Fables* 9). In order to find this central hypothesis Frye turned to Jung’s theory of archetypes, but deviating from the latter’s psychological focus, attempted to find and analyze archetypes in literature. Frye was not interested in the origins of these archetypes, or in the collective unconscious, but in their visible functions (cf. Abrams 224). Examining a variety of literary texts, Frye eventually defined an archetype as “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience” (qt. in Henderson and Brown). To Frye, archetypes were so interesting because he saw them as playing “an essential role in the refashioning [of] the material universe into an alternative verbal universe that is humanly intelligible and viable, because it is adapted to essential human needs and concerns” (Abrams 224/5).

Of course, this “refashioning” of the world to make it more easily understandable is not only a phenomenon of literature, but also exactly what happens in the narratives of fictional television series. “Real life” or, more specifically, current conflicts and discussions in society are introduced into a storyline by the creators, writers and producers of a program (cf. Newcombe and Hirsch 170ff. or Hicketier 353 ff.). By transporting these problematic situations into a mythological environment, or adding supernatural elements, the television creators have an exceptionally wide range of expressing ideas or solutions to contemporary social and cultural anxieties. Furthermore, as the negotiation of such questions seems more detached from the every-day experiences of the audience, they

are perceived as less immediate and demanding or even threatening. For example, if the fictional character Willow, in *BtVS* needs an intervention because she has become addicted to the use of magic, the obvious analogy to substance abuse problems in contemporary society does not need to be explained. However, as Willow is not struggling with alcohol or crystal meth, the audience is not confronted with a “real life” problem, which could be perceived as too close and the viewers might be unwilling to deal with this situation. Indeed, when Buffy and her friends help the recovering addict by removing all possible temptations from their shared environment, the audience understands the necessity of these actions without having to feel pressured into taking a stance themselves.

Easily recognizing particular archetypes, the audience is aware of the function of these characters, either consciously or unconsciously. And as the fictional environment of the television show is non-threatening – the viewer can always stop watching if she is not happy with the contents – the conflicts from our society are molded into an alternative filmic universe, where possible solutions are presented which can be negotiated further by the audience.

Frye believes that the reader approaching a literary work will first understand it in “terms of its linear units of narrative, then in terms of its spatial structure of imagery, then in relation to those structures in other works of the same genre, and so on to the structures of the literary universe itself. Such recurrent units are what Frye calls the archetypes of literature” (Stingle 317). In the second essay of his book *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye develops these ideas into a “theory of symbols” (symbols for him being the basic literary unit), with four levels of interpretation:

The first level is split between the descriptive sign, which moves centrifugally outward to other areas of discourse, and the symbol as motif, which moves centripetally into the language of literature. Then the symbol is treated as image, which includes formal or rhetorical analyses; next the symbol is treated generically in terms of its place as archetype; finally, on the anagogic level, the symbol is revealed as a microcosm of the literary universe itself. (Stingle 318; cf. *Anatomy* 71 – 128)

The idea of stepping back from a text, like from a painting “if we want to see composition instead of brushwork” (Frye, *Fables* 13), and discovering more content with every backward step, is going to be very useful for my own examinations. I will use exactly this method when analyzing the functions of archetypal images in the selected television series.

My first step is to look at a particular archetypal image in one or two episodes of a show, then put them into the context of the whole series. Afterwards, I am going to compare the archetypal images and their functions in one show to the other selected series, and finally interpret the archetype on a cultural and social level in general.

### **2.1.3 Development of Myth Theory**

As mentioned above, myth criticism today is a mosaic of colorful pieces put there by different scholars from different areas of literary and natural sciences. All of these scholars, however, recognized the significance of myth for their own contemporary society and culture, and developed a variety of methods for analyzing and interpreting the functions of myths appropriate to their own time and community. As my study will be informed by several of these scholars and theories, I am going to present some of the key principles guiding my examination on the following pages.

#### **Functionalism**

Èmile Durkheim, father of sociology as an academic discipline, added an important approach to the interpretation of mythology. Whereas Frazer's or Freud's studies were strongly influenced by the Victorian focus on economy and the individual, scholars like Durkheim put an emphasis on the collective by asserting "the primacy of society in history and the development of the individual consciousness" (Csapo 134) through the social order. Though Durkheim speaks of the "collective consciousness" in contrast to Jung's "collective unconsciousness," both scholars' ideas of their principles are closely related: "The collective consciousness integrates the individual through its 'collective representations' which embrace most of what we mean by culture" (ibid. 136). This consciousness which Durkheim speaks of is often found in mythological thought and should be understood as a fusion of many individual consciousnesses which

has the effect of disengaging a whole world of sentiments, ideas and images which, once born, obey laws all of their own. They attract each other, repel each other, unite, divide themselves and multiply, though these combinations are not commended and necessitated by the condition of the underlying reality. The life thus brought into being even enjoys so great an independence that it sometimes indulges in manifestations with no purpose or utility of any sort, for the mere pleasure of affirming itself (Durkheim, qt. in Csapo 137).



Functionalist scholars believed that myth could be used to reinforce the collective unconscious and the identification of an individual with her respective culture:

[Myths] justify and perpetuate the pattern of thought and behavior which makes up the particular mentality of a given social group and serve as a foundation and warrant for its customs and institutions. They 'establish a sociological charter' for individual components of the social system: 'the function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial event'. (Csapo 142)

While Durkheim and other functionalist scholars, such as Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, came to the erroneous conclusion that myths, rites or customs could only ever be understood within the closed community in which it originated, the conviction that myth functions as a method to strengthen values and belief systems of social, political, or even national groups, is one of the essential points of my study.

### **Structuralism and Semiotics**

The structuralist approach to mythology and myth interpretation has been hugely influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure and his systematization of language, most notably the classification of the signified, the signifier, and the sign (cf. de Saussure). For de Saussure language consisted of an abstract system, *langue*, and the spoken word, *parole*. We can compare the relationship between the *langue* and *parole*, between sign and the signified, with the relationship between the archetype and the archetypal image. Whereas the archetype is too abstract to be physically or mentally comprehended, the archetypal image presents one particular interpretation of the archetype. Thus, structuralists demonstrated that there is a subconscious level of semantic organization inherent to all human beings. All of humankind needs this organization to make sense of their environment and to cope with their daily lives. In most cases, however, people are not conscious of this behavior:

Whereas for Freud the subconscious (or unconscious) and conscious mind were frequently at variance, for the structuralist their connection is one of direct expression of unconscious knowledge by the conscious mind: this unconscious knowledge might sooner be described as dormant, rather than repressed. (Csapo 189)

De Saussure's concepts of *langue* and *parole* became essential to the work of another, critically acclaimed functionalist scholar: Claude Lévi-Strauss. He applied this distinction

to his research on the elementary mental structures of the human mind and argued that these structures form a so-called “deep grammar” in a society, which originates in the mind of the people and operates in them unconsciously. Lévi-Strauss studied such diverse social activities as the preparation of food, games or religious rites and discovered underlying structures by which meaning was produced. The function of myth, Lévi-Strauss found, was to provide a solution for difficult cultural problems: “myth is an anxiety-reducing mechanism that deals with unresolvable contradictions in a culture and provides imaginative ways of living with them” (ibid. 131). Thus, myth is capable of acting as a mediator between opposing concepts such as good/evil, light/dark, divine/human, etc. A hero or heroine in a myth may indeed possess character traits from both disparate forces, in order to bridge the apparent gap, eventually providing a solution for the problem and guiding the way for the social group.

One problem of structuralism is its often narrow interpretation of a myth or rite of only having one particular function. Any further meaning or understanding of a text is largely ignored. For example, the Russian structuralist scholar Vladimir Propp examined 100 Russian folktales (cf. *Morphology of the Folktale*) and found that all tales had similar narrative structures, i.e., 32 different narrative functions in a particular sequence, which were divided into six sections (cf. Fiske, *Culture* pp. 135). Propp furthermore found eight distinct ‘character roles’ which were located in seven ‘spheres of action’ (ibid. 137). In all this structuring, compartmentalization and generalization, however, the question for the meaning of the stories themselves ultimately got lost.

However, if one does not lose sight of the deeper cultural and social purposes of myths, structuralism, it is a very useful tool for breaking down myths or rites into smaller parts for closer observation, as I will do in my study. As a matter of fact, I am going to apply Lévi-Strauss’ thesis that myth functions as a cultural “trouble-shooter,” when it is used in modern American television shows which have a global audience. I will argue that mythological elements and symbols are used in these series to approach and negotiate problems and anxieties in contemporary society.

### **Poststructuralism and Postmodernism**

The French Marxist, literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes is often seen as standing on the threshold between structuralism and post-structuralism. What makes him so important to myth criticism is that he was the first to connect myth with mass culture. Following his Marxist convictions, Barthes believed that myth was a tool of the ruling

classes to govern the suppressed people, as myth “always promotes the interests of the dominant classes by making the meanings that serve these interests appear natural and universal” (Fiske 134). In his *Mythologies* (1957) Barthes used Marxism and structural anthropology to examine the tendency of his contemporary society to create modern myths from any cultural source, such as texts or sculptures, images or particular public events. Convinced of the importance of language and speech in the creation of myths, Barthes added to de Saussure’s system when he “reconceived myth as a speech act (or *parole*, which can include any signifying act, whether writing, painting, photography, or actions) with second-order reference to something of social importance” (Csapo 277).

Myth in mass culture, to Barthes, is still a sign which has its roots in language, but to which an additional level of meaning is added. The sign itself is no longer neutral, but is used as a signifier, with the additional meaning being the signified. However, this new meaning is not given to the sign randomly, but comes from ideas rooted in the social conscious (or unconscious). One of the most famous examples Barthes gives to clarify his theory is the discussion of a photograph on the cover of the magazine *Paris Match* from the 1950s. The image on the cover shows a young African boy in French uniform saluting. The signifier here is the boy saluting. The actual information we can retrieve from this photograph is minimal. Nevertheless, this image is capable to act as a myth-creating symbol. The points that are signified, e.g., the military, ethnic difference, being French, etc., transmit a message about France and the French Empire. That message is not necessarily that “France is a great empire and all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag” (Barthes 116), but a propagation of the myth of devotion to the *grande nation*, a story of success and of patriotism. In drawing all these potential new meanings from one photograph, it becomes a source for myths that are created by all who see it.

Even though I am rather skeptical of Barthes’ notion that a bourgeoisie society is working on imposing their values on the unsuspecting masses, there can be no doubt that dominant value systems are still very much a fact and firmly in place in today’s United States, and that television is necessarily influenced by these concepts. Furthermore, as television is a mass medium, the possibilities of creating new myths are extensive and I will examine my selected sources accordingly.

Influenced by de Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and Barthes, French philosopher Jacques Derrida sets out to move away from structuralism and is most famous for his theory of

deconstruction (cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*). Though the concept was enthusiastically applauded by many of his colleagues, it is still extremely difficult to find an absolute definition of deconstruction. Derrida himself has always been hesitant to offer definitions and rather than saying what deconstruction is, he tries to explain what it is not. It is not a type of analysis as such, nor a critique, or a method (cf. Wood and Bernasconi 3). Deconstruction is meant to be anti-structuralist, as “structures were to be undone, decomposed, desedimented” (ibid. 2), but at the same time it deals almost exclusively with structures. In contrast to structuralist scholars like de Saussure or Propp, however, Derrida is not looking for structures that create meaning, but he aims to question both structures and meanings in general as well as stress the dynamic nature of meaning. Derrida believes that every structure, formation of structure, meaning and formation of meaning can (and should) be questioned, composed, decomposed, and recomposed at will. Deconstruction thus became the most influential theoretical approach in postmodernism.

Postmodern scholars, some of the most renowned among them being Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, or Judith Butler, adopted Derrida’s theory of deconstruction within a variety of different fields of social criticism, such as feminist criticism, ethnic studies, queer theory, or postcolonial criticism. This diversity of approaches makes deconstruction and postmodern thought a useful tool in my study. Though based on the assumption that myth uses established structures to facilitate easier identification for audiences, the critical view on the construction of the narratives created from said structures, is invaluable for a thorough analysis.

Barthes’ discovery that mass media are easily capable of creating new myths for particular interest groups or even entire nations, directs my view toward American capitalist ideology as another strong influence on modern myth theory.

### **Postindustrial Capitalism and Ideology**

In our contemporary industrial society the brand of a product is often more important than the actual value we receive when buying it. In the process of selling a product to the consumer, new myths are created to make a product popular for a targeted group. Thus products are no longer simply functional and serve a specific purpose, but they become symbols wrapped in “mythical glammers” (cf. Csapo 286). The genuine use of a product steps back behind the desire that is created for the possession of the myth and the subsequent identification with it. Good examples for this, especially in an American context, are Marlboro cigarettes. Smoking Marlboro, according to the advertisers, is not

simply the act of enjoying a particular type and/or taste of tobacco, but the name alone invokes images of rugged Cowboys, roaming Mustangs, and a feeling of freedom and masculinity. Marlboro is the legendary “Marlboro Man” living an unrestricted life in “Marlboro Country.” Of course, such a person and such a country do not really exist; they are merely romanticized versions of the “American Old West.” However, most Americans (as well as most consumers in the Western world) will know the slogans and connect them to particular images and Marlboro products. Interestingly, the Marlboro myth is so deeply rooted in American advertisement traditions, as well as in the consciousness of the consumer, that ads and commercials function without showing a single cigarette.

Commercials do not only create new myths, but they will often enough use specific mythological elements to make their product more attractive. A very good example for this is the Gladiator commercial from Pepsi Cola. In their constant commercial combat against rivals, Pepsi enlists the suggestive powers of super stars to sell their products, and places them in mythical environments which can be either ancient or very modern.<sup>32</sup> In the 2009 Super Bowl Commercial for Pepsi, pop music stars Beyoncé, P!nk, Britney Spears and Enrique Iglesias, appear in an ancient Roman coliseum, with the three singers posing as “gladiators” and Iglesias as “Caesar”. The audience can easily decode the images of statues, a coliseum, people in “ancient Roman” garb, as a typical setting for Roman games, roughly 2000 years ago. Whereas Iglesias wears the regalia of a Roman general, as well as a golden laurel wreath on his head, to be recognized as a Caesar-type character, the three gladiators could have stepped right out of an episode of *XWP*. Beyoncé, P!nk, and Spears wear faux-antique costumes which may be vaguely reminiscent of Roman gladiators, but are mostly designed to show off the singers’ physical attributes.

Of course, the aim of the “gladiators” in the arena is not to fight, least of all each other, but to sing down the emperor from his gallery and liberate the Pepsi cans he has stashed

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<sup>32</sup> Of course, Pepsi Cola carefully adjusts their television spots to the particular target group. In a German Pepsi commercial, David Beckham and his fellow footballers seem to have gotten lost in a beer tent at the Oktoberfest, where several folk dancing, bearded men in lederhosen are shuffling the football in between them, while Ronaldo and the others start flirting with the waitresses, and of course, drinking Pepsi. The mythical heroes in this commercial are the soccer players and the environment they have to battle in order to gain the prize, the Pepsi, is a foreign place filled with strange people and traditions. A Japanese commercial has Beckham and his team play against a number of Sumo Wrestlers for a cooler filled with Pepsi cans. Though fairly comical, the Sumo Wrestlers put their largeness to good use and win the game, concluding the spot with drinking some of the soda and strolling off with the cooler. Whereas the soccer players represent very modern sports heroes, the Japanese sumotori represent equally important heroic figures, with strong cultural roots and a long tradition. In both the German and the Japanese commercial, the locals win the Pepsi from the soccer players. The underlying messages are obvious: Pepsi is for all the cool people, no matter where they come from.

away in a big chest next to him. Having won their Pepsi, the gladiators freely hand out the Pepsi cans to the audience. The not too-subtle message is that Pepsi is for everyone. The Pepsi can itself thus becomes a prize in a mythical fight between an unjust government and the people. Pepsi's Gladiator commercial is especially successful in its combination of ancient mythology and modern style, and a further examination would certainly be intriguing.<sup>33</sup> The Pepsi Gladiator commercial shows very nicely how quickly and easily ancient myths and legends can be modified and adapted for transmitting messages to a modern American (Western) audience. It furthermore affirms the continuing perceived significance of the Roman culture as one of the roots of Western civilization.

Like cigarettes or sodas, television series are but another type of consumer product (cf. Bignell 66). In order to reach their target audience the creators of a series will also use and/or create specific myths surrounding their product in order to sell it. The fact that a person likes a television show and watches regularly also implies that he/she identifies with particular characters, situations/narratives and value systems inherent to that show.<sup>34</sup> To find out more about ways in which these norms and values can be transported within a show's narrative is one of the main aspects of this work.

By choosing to drink Pepsi, smoke Marlboro, or watch *BtVS*, the customer participates – whether knowingly or not – in the support and further expansion of the commercial myth. The choice of product generally also entails the unconscious endorsement of certain values and beliefs. Marlboro is designed for consumers who will most likely sympathize with the romanticized ideal of a free, rugged, self-determined life. The target group of Pepsi is young consumers who may enjoy contemporary music, are rather likely to be interested in celebrities, and feel Pepsi adds a certain glamor to their own lives. Viewers of *BtVS* are probably interested in the supernatural with a high proportion among them being nerds and geeks. Commercial mystification then is so important because it aims at the consumer's identity. Identity as an individual or a group is "itself a commodity in consumer capitalism, equivalent and exchangeable with any other" (Csapo 289).

The formation of identity has become a varied and constantly shifting process in our modern world. With the opportunity to participate in many different social and cultural groups at any given time, facilitated by television, the Internet, and other social media, we are more than ever exposed to myths and symbols propagating different ideological values

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<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, including a close reading of the commercial at this point, would take us too far away from the actual topic of this study.

<sup>34</sup> A more detailed analysis on identification with television series/characters follows in chapter 2.2.

and norms. A person may identify with a variety of different groups, depending on class, race/ethnicity, religion or gender (cf. Csapo 292). However, in order for a society to function, a comprehensive ideology needs to connect the different groups and to find common ground for everyone: “the general ideology has to bridge over, obscure, or efface the divisions between the ideologies of the dominant social subgroups” (ibid. 292-293). As a commercial product, television series are aimed at creating an emotional relationship with their viewers, based on identification with characters, narratives, and so on. In order to become and remain popular then, a show needs to find a large audience with a similar ideological position. In the age of online discussion forums, blogs, fan fiction, etc., the opportunities for the individual viewer to not simply consume, but to appropriate characters and storylines and re-interpret them to their own preferences, are vast.<sup>35</sup> Today, dealing with ideology is not confined to accepting or rejecting a dominant creed, but to interpret and form new meanings from any public text. For the television shows I am going to examine in this work this means that narratives cannot be limited to one particular reading, but may be questioned and interpreted in a variety of ways.

### 2.1.4 Critique of Myth Criticism

Myth criticism, which was especially popular in the 1950s and 1960s, has since then been criticized as interpreting literature on too narrow a scale. As a theory it has been “attacked as reductionist by historicists and formalist critics for ignoring the historical and cultural context of literary works as well as their specific formal premises” (Childers and Hentzi 198). Historicists have held that any text, work of art, etc. can only be understood in its immediate historical context:

Historicism is the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place which it occupied and the role which it played within a process of development (Mandelbaum, qt. in Childers and Hentzi 136).

This idea to evaluate a particular event in its historical context seems solid, until one suggests, as Derrida’s deconstruction theory does, that nothing is stable, that context is unlimited and eternally shifting (cf. Derrida, *Grammatology*, and *Writing and Difference*).

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<sup>35</sup> I will discuss the phenomenon of the relationship of television shows and their fans in more detail in the following chapter.

Furthermore, if we consider literary motifs which have transcended millennia, such as Greek and Roman gods,<sup>36</sup> we cannot limit the interpretation of these figures to one specific position in time.

In tune with deconstruction, New Historicism has made the valid point that history itself is not a collection of accurate facts but always a subjective interpretation of and by the people involved:

‘man’ is a construct of social and historical circumstances and not an autonomous agent of historical change. There is nothing essential about the actions of human beings; there is no such thing as ‘human nature.’ Instead, individuals undergo a process of subjectification, which on one hand shapes them as conscious initiators of action, but on the other hand places them in social networks and cultural codes that exceed their comprehension or control. (Childers and Henzi 136)

Considering the arguments brought against myth criticism by formalists and historicists it appears that their critique is outdated. Theories of deconstruction or New Historicism have opened up the limited orientation with which historicists and formalist critics worked.

As we have seen in the discussion of the many different theoretical influences on myth criticism above, myth and archetypal criticism have continually proven to be versatile and adaptable concepts for the interpretation of literature and other media. Therefore, my main approach for looking at the functions of myths and archetypes in television series will be myth and archetypal criticism, including elements of psychoanalysis, structuralism, and postindustrial capitalism. Since I am going to focus on the narratology of the television series, questions of identity formation will guide my examination as well. The following chapter is thus concerned with the relationship of television, narrative structure and identity.

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<sup>36</sup> Greek and Roman gods, for example, have been essential protagonists of literary works throughout the centuries and only recently have been used in the extremely popular young adult *Percey Jackson* novels (turned into feature films) by Rick Riordan.



## 2.2 Television, Narrative Structure and Identity

“Stories tell us who we are”<sup>37</sup>

In a country with more than 300 million inhabitants living across roughly 3,800,000 square miles and six different time zones, national television is easily the most important medium which connects people all across the United States. As far back as 1983 Newcomb and Hirsch already observed that television was the U.S.’s “national medium, replacing those media – film, radio, picture magazines, newspapers – that once served a similar function.” (162)<sup>38</sup> I believe that Newcomb’s and Hirsch’s argument is still true and that television holds a unique position as a narrative medium in the United States which contributes strongly to national and individual identity formation. This chapter therefore deals with the function of contemporary American television as a storyteller, television as a source for the creation of a national and individual identity and the role of the audience. I will also survey key scholarship concerning the analysis of television narrative and establish my own approach for analyzing the selected television series in this study.

### Television as Storyteller

One function that television has, perhaps more than any other medium in the United States, is that of entertainment and of telling stories. Kozloff has suggested that television is “*the* principal storyteller in contemporary American society” (Kozloff 67, emphasis mine). Stories are told for purposes of relaxation and distraction from work, for relaying information, for passing on tales and also for education. In the history of civilization, storytelling is one of the oldest ways to preserve and sustain cultural traditions within social groups. In most societies the local storyteller or bard was held in high regard and possessed a unique social status. The task of the storyteller was not simply that of functioning as a historical guide for a particular social group, but also to explain customs,

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<sup>37</sup> Xena's companion Gabrielle says this to the biblical King David when they are discussing psalms in *XWP*, “The Giant Killer” (2.03).

<sup>38</sup> Even though today the Internet may have become very important in terms of bringing people together, I would claim that it still does not hold the same importance that television does for three reasons: 1) the World Wide Web connects people from a multitude of different countries and in a global community ideas of nationality usually come second; 2) access to the Internet is even today not as common as access to television; 3) a great number of websites are dedicated to television shows, such as *Star Trek*, *BtVS*, *ER*, etc., thus once again emphasizing the importance of television.

rituals and values, and comment on changes occurring in society.<sup>39</sup> This mediation and interpretation of rules and norms is something we can very easily observe occurring in television today: “In anthropological terms this bardic function of the television medium corresponds to what is called *ritual condensation*. Ritual condensation is the result of projecting abstract ideas (good/bad) in manifest form on to the external world (where good/bad becomes white/black)” (Fiske, *Television* 89). One of the most palpable forms of this ritual condensation in American television can be found in Western series of the 1940s and 1950s, where notions of good/bad are visually translated into white/black. The typical “bad guy” in one of these Western shows could be spied with little trouble, as he would be clothed in black or at least darker colors and a black hat. Fighting this criminal was the “good guy,” often a sheriff or other law enforcement agent who would be dressed in lighter colors and wear a white or light colored hat.<sup>40</sup>

But even though we can observe similar functions of the tribal storyteller and contemporary television, modern American television is not a neutral creator of stories. The primary aim of this particular “storyteller” is to create profit (cf. Kelleter 18 ff.). It also means that a large number of people are involved in the decision-making process of what a show can or cannot do, in order to reach the widest audience possible. Whereas this constant manipulation and adaptation of series and characters by countless people may be seen as a distinct disadvantage, I would like to think of it as an accumulation of evidence, giving us an abundance of clues as to which moral values, behavior norms and cultural ideas are widely accepted – or at least are thought of as widely accepted – by different groups of people at a certain time, and how these presupposed ideas might change over the years. As such, television functions as a seismograph of culture at any given time. Since the creators, producers and studio executives are all aiming for revenue-creating shows, they have to function as “cultural interpreters, intent on ‘reading’ the culture through its relation to ‘market’” (Newcomb and Hirsch 170) in order to predict the popularity of a particular product. In this, I agree with Hirsch and Newcomb that all of the people

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<sup>39</sup> For further examination of this topic see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, or also T.M. Leitch, *What Stories Are*.

<sup>40</sup> In *The Lone Ranger* (1949-1957) television series, for example, the heroic Lone Ranger would always wear a stark white hat, whereas his adversaries would wear dark and/or dirty clothes and often dark hats. One notable exception is perhaps the figure of “Zorro” who, while being a heroic “good guy,” is usually shown wearing black clothes, a black hat, and a black mask; whether in films, from *The Mark of Zorro* (1920) with Douglas Fairbanks in the title role, to one of the latest instalments *The Legend of Zorro* (2005), with Antonio Banderas embodying the hero; or television shows from the 1957-1959 Disney series to the “new Zorro,” another American show running from 1990-1993. Zorro is the notable exception. The most probable reasons are that he is not a white American male, and furthermore stands in the tradition of the vigilante hero. Both factors remove him from the standard image coding of white American heroes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

involved in creating a popular television show are “actively engaged in gauging cultural values. Their own research, the assumptions and the findings, needs to be re-analyzed for cultural implications. In determining who is doing what with whom, at which times, they are interpreting social behavior in America and assigning it meaning” (ibid.). Of course, a mass audience of a mass medium like television is not simply one big empty void into which ideas and interpretations are poured. More often than not viewers keenly observe and individually assign meaning to what they see. They “make meanings by selecting that which touches experience and personal history” (ibid. 171). Therefore the importance of television cannot be underestimated as even nowadays it still is “the expressive medium that, through its storytelling functions, unites and examines a culture,” (ibid. 162) in our case: the United States.

Between the creators, writers and producers of a show, the network officials selling airtime and, of course, the audience, there has to be an accord as to what type of characters, settings and storylines are at the same time original in their creation, adequate to the moral codes of television stations, but most importantly, acceptable and interesting to audiences: “To be popular, the television text has to be read and enjoyed by a diversity of social groups, so its meanings must be capable of being inflected in a number of different ways” (Fiske, *Culture* 66) Consequently, the people involved in creating a television show, those who “sell it” to the audience, and finally the viewers themselves, all need to be able to relate to the contents of a series. I propose that using mythology and archetypes is an exceptionally effective method employed by television creators to create this “common ground” for American audiences at the turn of the second millennium.

### **Narration and Identity**

If, as pointed out above, television is used as a vessel to collect and negotiate values which are of social importance to a particular group, then stories that are told within this diegetic space may also be central to the formation of individual, group, or even national identities.<sup>41</sup> From fairy tales to urban legends, stories or narratives give us a notion of how the world works and what our place in it might be. The importance of stories in our everyday social and cultural context cannot be emphasized strongly enough (cf. Neumann and Nünning) and the influence of media such as film and television regarding the

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, “DisseminNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation.” See also Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning *Neue Ansätze in der Erzähltheorie*.

formation of individual and collective identities is generally undisputed (cf. Hickethier 353 ff.). Some scholars even believe that narration is one of the most essential tools in the self-referencing of an individual, a group or even a whole nation.<sup>42</sup>

As contemporary societies become increasingly diverse, we can observe a heightened interest in the relationship between narration and the formation of identity.<sup>43</sup> Narrative psychologists see stories at the very foundation of creating an individual identity, as events, emotions and experiences are brought into a seemingly rational sequence which then serves as an explanation of the course of life lived so far.<sup>44</sup> Drawing on Ricœur's theories on narration and identity from the mid-1980s (cf. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, and Valdes, *Reflection and Imagination*), scientists today assume "that individual identity formation is based on a sense of unity and sameness over time" (Neumann and Nünning 6). This does not mean that an individual and the story of her life are fixed in space or time. Quite the contrary is the case as "the underlying plurality of possible narratives creates a dynamic that keeps in view actual stories about real life and possible stories about potential life" (ibid. 7). The plurality of potential stories explaining life to ourselves as well as to our environment is essential to the understanding of being. However, in every interpretation and narration of life we need to keep in mind that we are always influenced by the culture and the society we live in:

The developed stories of narrative self-identity must be embedded in and constructed out of a person's particular environment – that is, the specific vocabulary and grammar of its language, its 'stock of working historical conventions', and the pattern of its belief and value system ... Narratives of self-identity are based on fundamental, universal narrative forms, yet the manner in which people style and fill them with content depends on the particular historical conventions of their time and place. (Polkinghorne 144)

Cultural norms, belief and value systems are more often than not rather abstract ideas clothed in images drawn up by our everyday environment, including literature, music, television, print media, politics, public opinion and a variety of other sources. Because of

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Knut Hickethier, "Populäre Fernsehserien zwischen nationaler und globaler Identitätsstiftung."

<sup>43</sup> A good overview on recent scholarship on narration and identity is given by Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning's "Ways of Self-Making in (Fictional) Narrative: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Narrative and Identity."

<sup>44</sup> This strategy of collecting events in a person's life to successfully create a continuing story of his or her past can be seen on the social network Facebook. Since early 2012 every user's profile is laid out as a "chronicle" of his or her life.

its high visibility and usage we have to accept that television as a tool of identity formation is essential. Aside from the Internet, television is probably the fastest-changing mass medium in Western culture. And every day the audience chooses which stories they wish to see: newscasts, feature films, documentaries, soap operas, sitcoms, series, etc. Within all of these programs lie a multitude of choices and meanings which need to be actively negotiated:

television discourse presents us daily with a constantly up-dated version of social relations and cultural perceptions. Its own messages respond to changes in these relations and perceptions, so that its audience is made aware of the multiple and contradictory choices available from day to day which have the potential to be selected for future ways of seeing. (Fiske and Hartley 18)

The possibility, the motivation, and the expectation to choose are crucial to today's audiences. As pointed out above, I agree with Fiske that television audiences are not simply uncritical and silent masses of organic material who accept everything on screen as the absolute truth. With this opinion, Fiske contradicts Adorno who believed that audiences were helpless victims of dominant powers that were trying to indoctrinate the lower classes of society with the values of the established system (cf. Gauntlett 22-32). Instead, I think that individual viewers, especially those who watch a series regularly, are very actively engaged when watching television. Even if we consider Fiske's emphasis on the ability and willingness of the audience to interpret the texts they watch as perhaps a bit too optimistic (cf. Fiske, *Culture, and Television*), I am convinced that, especially with an increasing use of the Internet, the audience has never been more actively involved than today. Evidence to this active interpretation of series are the countless websites on the Internet dedicated to television in general, e.g., shows or characters from shows, where fans communicate their thoughts about individual episodes, behavior of characters, write fan-fiction or otherwise bring their own feelings, interpretations and meanings into what they see on the screen. Kelleter has suggested that television series tell their stories while simultaneously assessing their potential reception: "...regelmäßig fortlaufende[...] Geschichten, die in der Regel zeitgleich – oder in seriellen Strukturen gedacht: in konstanter Rückkopplung – zu ihrer Rezeption erzählt werden" (22). Thus, the response of the audience to the narration of a series is of the utmost significance.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> In his collection of essays on Populäre Serialität: Narration – Evolution – Distinktion, Kelleter and others consider the significance of serial narration, in television programs and other media. Popular seriality is regarded

Of course, Adorno does have a valid point when he says that every television program includes a variety of messages, some of which are more obvious than others. We should not forget that every television production, every fictional narrative, is also always part of a system of “power relations; they build the values, and beliefs that define cultural mentalities and dominant ideologies. Narration, even purely ‘aesthetic’ narratives of fictional characters and events, can never be divorced from political and ideological questions” (Neumann and Nünning 10).

Nevertheless, even the most apparent interpretations contained in fictional narratives, which have in all probability been influenced by key ideologies and ideologists, are not static:

even preferred meanings, which usually coincide with the perceptions of the dominant sections of society, must compete with and be seen in the context of other possible ways of seeing. These 'active contradictions' in the television message serve to remind us of our culture's daily state of play. (Fiske and Hartley 18)

Negotiation of dominant messages and individual interpretation are an important part of the process of identification. Identification, through television can happen in different ways. When watching television, we may find that we identify with a specific program or a specific character on a fairly abstract level:

This is an identification with the discursive structure of the text that recognizes that its play of similarity and difference along the axes of nation, race, class, gender, power, work, etc. fits with the discursive structure of the reading subject. The pleasure depends not on agreement with the sense that is made, but on the agreement with the way that it is made, with the adequacy of our discourses and their cultural categories as a means of ordering our perception of both text and world. (Fiske, *Culture* 178)

Each television series offers any viewer a range of different characters to love, hate or identify with on a particular level. Television characters usually have the advantage of not being “closed characters,” i.e., characters which have no potential for further development. More often television characters stand as metonyms which “invite the viewer to fill in the

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in the context of popular culture and the book poses questions such as which new types of narration have been created through serial narration and how popular series influence our perception of social structures. Especially this last question is a key concern of my study.

rest” (ibid. 170). However, it is also possible to dislike a particular character or a particular message of a television program, to read or interpret any implication in any number of ways. Once again, how a text is read is always up to the reader, or the viewer. According to Fiske

Realism invites us to read character psychologically as the representation of a unique individual: this invitation is likely to be accepted by those who accommodate themselves comfortably to the dominant ideology and the individualism that is so central to it. But those who are positioned more oppositionally are more likely to read character discursively, as an embodiment of social values and their functions in the narrative. Discursive reading strategies discourage identification and promote a Brechtian critical alienation between viewer and character ... Discursive readings emphasize the social, realistic readings the individual: discursive readings are thus more radical, realistic ones more reactionary. The conventions by which character is represented on television are open enough to allow either reading strategy, or a combination of or alternation between them, according to the political orientation of the viewer. (Fiske, *Culture* 154)

Even though I believe that a discursive reading need not necessarily lead to a more critical reception and interpretation of a television show or character, it is important to emphasize yet again that television offers a variety of readings. As a matter of fact, the opportunity of reading a text discursively may support identity formation in a very specific way: “The reflective modification of culturally prevailing narratives can potentially undermine the ideological messages encapsulated in the stories that compose the cultural archive and open up a space in which stigmatized groups can renegotiate and reconstruct their identity” (Ritvoi 234). A case in point would be the relationship of Xena and her companion Gabrielle in *XWP*. During the first two seasons *XWP* attracted a steadily growing fan base of lesbian viewers (a fairly marginalized group) who interpreted the relationship between Xena and her companion Gabrielle as romantic and potentially sexual.<sup>46</sup> However, I do not suspect that this type of discursive reading led to a more realistic or critical viewing of the series in a Brechtian sense. Whereas many viewers read Xena and Gabrielle simply as best

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<sup>46</sup> The producers and writers confirmed that they were consciously playing with the idea of Xena and Gabrielle having a romantic relationship, presenting the couple as “soulmates” who would stay together throughout time, and “planting” subtext throughout the storylines. Nevertheless, the show’s executives were aware of the fact that they could not include too explicit content, either romantic or sexual, in the series as the studio in consideration of their advertisers would probably have pulled out (Bonus Features *XWP* Season 3).

friends who travel together and experience exciting adventures, a vast amount of websites and a large part of *XWP*'s most enduring fan base were dedicated to this perceived homosexual partnership<sup>47</sup> and found new meanings among groups of people who were connected through their interpretation of the show. By actively engaging in the exchange of opinions and ideas through personal and collective narrative "groups create collective memories, thus providing a shared horizon for signifying processes and collective self-definitions" (Neumann and Nünning 12). Recently, creators of series have become more aware of a show's following on the Internet and even engage with their fans via Facebook or other social media. In the case of *XWP* something very unusual happened, when one of the most widely read slash fan fiction authors, Melissa Good, was actually hired to write two episodes of the series (cf. "Coming Home" 6.01 and "Legacy" 6.05).<sup>48</sup> Thus, we can recognize an increasing trend of television creators to actively communicate, and even interact, with their audiences.

Since the possibilities of reading and interpreting a television show, individual episodes, and characters, are so numerous, I will focus on some of the more dominant reading options of particular episodes, to deduce which values and norms were central at the time of creation and airing of a television series, and which points of identification were commonly accepted. This also includes the analysis of narratives in which prevalent values and norms are clearly questioned, and open discussion on perceived social or cultural problems.

### Analyzing Television Narrative

As pointed out above, when reading television series as a text, the tools for analyzing this medium must accommodate the complexity of the audio-visual source. Some of the most common methods for analyzing film or television narratives today, have grown out of literary studies (cf. Griem 156):

Literary criticism focus[es] on television programmes as texts, where the method of discussing them is to study closely their structure, characters and themes, in similar ways to the study of literature and drama. The advantage [...] is that there is an example accessible [...] By closely analysing a programme it can be discovered how

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<sup>47</sup> One of the most comprehensive websites supporting the idea of Gabrielle and Xena as a lesbian couple, as well as offering up to date information on the two actresses embodying the fictional characters and a forum for exchange on the series, is the Australian Xena Information Page (<http://www.ausxip.com>).

<sup>48</sup> However, neither of the episodes featured a change in the relationship of the two main characters as it had been established throughout the show.



the programme is structured and how it creates its meanings by using images and sound in certain ways; critical arguments about the programme can be tested out and proved by referring back to a concrete example. (Bignell 15f.)

Another advantage for the analyst is that a lot of the terminology developed in literary studies can easily be adapted to the analysis of film or television narrative. The disadvantage of being faced with some of the problems inherent in said terminology is relatively small in comparison.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, literary criticism cannot be the only source for analyzing television. Most obviously, since it is not meant to include any of the auditory elements of the medium. In order to incorporate factors such as music, sound effects, etc., Seymour Chatman developed a model for analysis in his 1978 book *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. This model successfully covers the “basic narratological dichotomies” (Jahn and Nünning 25) of audio-visual media. Even though Chatman’s model, based on structural narratology, has at times been criticized as being too narrow,<sup>50</sup> is very useful when one is interested in distinguishing between the story which is told and the way in which the story is told, i.e., the discourse. Chatman differentiates, for example, between actions, events, order, style, etc. More recent developments of Chatman’s so-called “two-track-model” are even more diverse (cf. Allrath/Gymnich/Surkamp 2 ). His new model also allows for the different types of audio input, e.g. voices, music or noises, the point of origin, whether it is off-screen or onscreen, and visual impressions such as the nature of an image, i.e., actors, props, locations, and the treatment of the image in terms of cinematography or editing. Perception of a scene, a person, or any image on the television screen may vary according to the way the auditory and the visual channels are treated. Analyzing a text according to Chatman’s categories allows a close reading of the many different elements inherent to a television source, and gives the analyst room for different types of media.

Chatman’s model provides us with the basic notions of the complex interplay of what we hear and what we see on the television screen. Describing what we can see seems fairly natural and easy; however, what we hear is often unconscious and needs heightened attention. We need to differentiate sounds according to type or in relation to the image that is shown. For example, we may hear music or voices or other sounds either on-screen or

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<sup>49</sup> For a more detailed description of problematic terms see Wenzel, 9 f.

<sup>50</sup> Criticism especially focuses on the story as an arbitrary construct which cannot be separated from the narrative discourse. See e.g. Adams 39-52.

off-screen and it is important how these sounds are connected to the diegesis, i.e., the narrated world (cf. Griem 165-167). Depending on how sound is used in a film it can have different functions, e.g., continuity or discontinuity, voice-over-narration in an exposition or in a documentary, creating certain moods, etc. (ibid. 167). This again is important to the propagation of specific norms and values within a particular television show or episode.

Even though Chatman's model allows for a very comprehensive analysis of all elements within a television text, my focus of analysis will be more on the aspects concerned with narrative and refer to particular visual or sound options only when they emphasize the narrative in a significant way. Therefore, I am going to adopt Jonathan Bignell's narrative approach (cf. above, p.19 f.) for analyzing the television narratives in my study. However, where Bignell distinguishes between "story" and "discourse," in which "story" is the set of events and "discourse" the process within which the events are put into context, I will focus on the context of the stories being told. Consequently, I will not follow Bignell's distinction and instead refer to both elements of storytelling as narrative.

One further question which needs to be addressed is the question of the narrator in a television production. This point continues to be controversially discussed within the field of television studies. In literature it is fairly easy to spot a narrative mode. Mostly, we will find a first-person narrator, a third-person omniscient, or limited omniscient narrator, guiding us through the story. With television the question remains who exactly is telling the story. Is there any form of narrator? Is television a narrative situation in itself? Usually, we do not find an identifiable narrator in television series and very often "tv series tend to be seen as largely anonymous" (Allrath 7). Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, as, for example, in television series which make use of voice-over narration by the one of the protagonists such as *Wonder Years* (1988-1993), *MacGyver* (1985-1992), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), or – with a twist – *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), where the voice-over is supplied by an absent, dead character who is not one of the protagonists of the show. This form of narration often advances the exposition or gives background information on personal relationships. Even though voice-over narration can certainly be seen as a narrative tool, the voice itself cannot be understood as an accurate equivalent of the literary narrator as "they generally have a more limited range of functions, being usually restricted to explaining features of the narrated world, commenting on them, or adding information which is not provided visually" (Allrath 14). Over the past 30 years,

scholars have tried to find a term to define this invisible entity which shows the audience what is happening:

Television viewers, when they constitute themselves as an audience and answer to television's call to join a community of viewers, are making an identification with the audience position laid out for them by the signs, codes and narrative structures of the programme [...] It is often hard to specify what this institutional narrator is, whether for instance it is the production team which has designed and made the programme, or the channel on which it is broadcast. (Bignell 101, emphasis Bignell)

Kozloff calls the narrating instance an "image-maker," an "agency, which chooses, orders, presents, and thus tells the narrative" (78-9). Staying closer to the idea of a storyteller, Gaudreault uses the term "fundamental narrator" or "meganarrator" (cf. Gaudreault). Scholars influenced by literary studies have generally preferred more classical expressions such as external or cinematic narrator or narrative instance (cf. Stam and Burgoyne) or "implied author" (cf. Branigan, or Kozloff 78). Focusing on the one crucial aspect of the medium, others see the "camera" (cf. Pudovkin) as the one in charge of narration, emphasizing that "the camera is not just a neutral recording device, but plays an important role in telling the story since it selects what the viewers see" (Allrath 14). Moreover, whatever the camera sees and shows has previously been selected by writers, executive producers, cinematographers etc. After the initial filming there are even more people involved with shaping the view of the camera in post-production. Editors, directors, studio executives, and even commercial breaks, influence the way in which the camera presents its images and how the viewer interprets what she sees. Therefore, I believe the term "camera" is too imprecise, as it tends to encourage a focus on the technical side which too easily hides the human factor involved.

But do we even need some form of a narrator to understand television narrative? Griem and Voigts-Virchow argue that the figure of a narrator is not necessary to follow the story: "Da im grammatiklosen Film Subjektivität flexibel und apperativ entsteht, ist insgesamt das Konzept eines Filmerzählers entbehrlich" (163). Even though it seems feasible that the concept of an apparent narrator in television is expendable, I think it is important to be aware of and emphasize the influence of all the different people and institutions behind the imagery. The many storytellers in a television series are the studio executives, the

producers,<sup>51</sup> the writers, the executive producers, the directors, the actors, the technicians, the editors, and many, many more. They are all a part of the process of creating the narrative for the audience to follow. In light of this, and also of the fact that this work is based on literary theory, I would like to position myself closer to literary terminology by referring to the narrator of a television show, if needed, as authored image. This term allows for the many creative heads and hands composing the narrative in image, sound and discourse within a television series.

Before going into the analytical stage of this study, I would like to address the aspect of gender, which is one of the main aspects of my work. I have very consciously chosen three television series as the basis for my study, in which the main protagonist is female. As pointed out above, Western storytelling traditions are best known for their male hero figures. Consequently, I am interested in the utilization of television as a platform on which notions of gender, gender roles and sexuality are negotiated. The question of how much of fictional television programs participate in the reconstruction of gender will be examined in the following chapter.

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<sup>51</sup> Though producers are not generally part of the creative process, they decide whether a financial investment in a television series is profitable or not, i.e., whether a series is produced or not.

## 2. 3 Reconstruction of Gender

*On reaching Nemea, he [Heracles] sought out the lion, and began by shooting arrows at it, but when he discovered that the beast was invulnerable, he raised his club and chased after it. When the lion took refuge in a cave which had two entrances, Heracles walled up one of them and went in through the other to attack the beast; and throwing his arm round its neck, he held it in a stranglehold until he had throttled it.*  
(Apollodorus 73)

Many centuries have passed since these stories were written down in which Heracles had to prove his worth as a hero by valiantly struggling through the twelve labors given to him by King Eurystheus. Nevertheless, the adventures of Heracles, Perseus or Ulysses and other Greek and Roman mythological heroes, are still considered worth telling.<sup>52</sup> These tales are evidence that the roots of Western culture can be found in stories about fearless masculine heroes who display favorable character traits and behavior, and serve as a model for differentiating between good and evil: “from ancient times, Western society’s just warrior narrative has been male privileged. The male ‘just warrior’ fights and dies for the greater good, whereas the female ‘beautiful soul’ epitomizes the maternal war-support figure in need of male protection” (Early and Kennedy 1). Today, however, there is Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, fighting and dying and coming back from death (twice) for the greater good, whereas the (male) friend, Xander Harris, is Buffy’s emotional support. Being no physical match for the demons and vampires they encounter, Xander also often enough needs to be protected by Buffy. Contemporary American television is filled with male and female heroes alike, accepted and loved by audiences. Considering these two very different observations in classical and contemporary Western culture it becomes apparent just how much notions of gender have changed since the days of Heracles and his companions. The importance of gender and sexuality, especially in popular culture, has increased most noticeably in the past few decades. In this chapter I would therefore like to examine some traditional and some current approaches to the understanding of gender in society and on television, as well as to consider the influence of images of gender and sexuality on identity construction.

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<sup>52</sup> Aside from literature we find their stories in popular entertainment, e.g. films, such as *Clash of the Titans* (1982), or more recently in television series, such as *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* (1995-1999) or *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

**Approaches to and Constructions of Gender**

Looking back, once again, at the stories of the ancient Greeks and Romans we quickly notice that their world is predominantly a world of men. Women rarely feature as heroic figures in ancient Greek or Roman mythology, but rather as objects. Women are prizes to be won by the hero or they are instruments or victims of fathers, brothers or husbands. A very good example for this instrumentalization and victimization is one event in the mythology of the Trojan War. Both, at the very beginning of the narrative and the very end, we find a beautiful young girl who is sacrificed so that the (male) community may achieve their objectives:

When the combined Greek forces had assembled under the leadership of the powerful king Agamemnon and were ready to sail across the Aegean Sea to attack the city of Troy, they found they were thwarted by the lack of a suitable wind. The remedy, they discovered to their horror, lay in the sacrifice of Agamemnon's virgin daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis, whom Agamemnon had offended. Once the girl was dispatched, the expedition was able to set off and in time successfully sacked the city.

After Troy had fallen and its King had been slain, one last terrible act was demanded of the victorious Greeks before they could return home: the ghost of Achilles, who had been killed in action, demanded as his prize Polyxena, a harmless maiden, daughter of Priam, the defeated Trojan king. Achilles had been a warrior of such distinction that his posthumous wishes could not easily be ignored. The girl was sacrificed and the Greeks sailed away. (Woodford 3)

Of course, there are famous and strong women in Greek mythology as well: Cassandra of Troy, for example. When Cassandra, who has been granted the gift of prophecy by Apollo, does not appreciate his romantic advances, he curses her so that no one will believe what she foresees. Even though Cassandra warns the Trojans about the Trojan Horse and the subsequent destruction of Troy, people merely think her insane and do not believe her. A tale about the cruelty of the Gods, Cassandra's story is at the same time the tragic account of a woman who is scorned for having exceptional powers.

Another group of fierce women from Greek mythology are the Amazons, a group of warrior women whose queen Penthesilea is tributed with fighting and eventually dying as part of the Trojan Army. The story goes that as Penthesilea was killed by the Greek Achilles, he fell in love with her beauty posthumously, and even killed his comrade

Thersites, who mocked him because of his yearning.<sup>53</sup> This tragic and somewhat morbid tale first destroys and then objectifies a powerful and exceptional woman. The great warrior Penthesilea is slain and only in death becomes the object of Achilles's affection, leaving the once formidable queen of the Amazons with no agency whatsoever. Perhaps with the exception of the female gods of the Olympic Pantheon<sup>54</sup> we can see a pattern in mythological narratives: the fate of a woman is often dark and overshadowed by male relatives or enemies or/and heroic women usually do not survive to enjoy their victories. Either way, women, who are not directly connected to male heroes, epic battles, etc., simply do not find the same prominence as their male counterparts (cf. Cotterell). And even if there is a woman who features in a tale, this tale will almost certainly end very tragically for her.

Other mythologies which play a significant part in Western culture, e.g., the Celtic or the Nordic mythology demonstrate repetitions of those patterns which we have observed in Greek mythology, with very few exceptions from the rule (ibid.).

Keeping in mind these narratives, which are still considered to be essential to the foundation of modern Western civilization, I would like to leave a detailed analysis of the development of gender images throughout the centuries to other scholars<sup>55</sup> and continue with U.S. popular culture, or more specifically, television culture, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here we can see an acute difference in the treatment of gender narratives paving the way to new ideas of gender in American television. The feminist movement impacts strongly on American culture and, consequently, on the way in which gender is constructed on television. Feminism sweeps the world in three waves.<sup>56</sup> The first wave has become famous for its suffragettes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, fighting to give women the vote (cf. Wheeler). Whether or not early American television was influenced by these suffragettes is impossible to say. However, strong women in American popular culture appear relatively early in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: "Physically strong and supernaturally enhanced women have a long history in American pop culture: think back to

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<sup>53</sup> References to this story can be found in Pseudo-Appolodorus's *Epitome of the Bibliothekē* 5.1, or Sextus Propertius's *Elegies*, Book III.11, poem XI.

<sup>54</sup> Though undoubtedly full of agency and quite powerful the Greek (and Roman) gods and goddesses will not be discussed here, as this study is primarily concerned with women who, though outfitted with supernatural powers, are human.

<sup>55</sup> See for example Helford. *Fantasy Girls : Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, or Inness. *Tough Girls : Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*.

<sup>56</sup> For a detailed overview of the development of feminism see Jennifer M. Saul's *Feminism*, or Mary Evans's collection of essays *Feminism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*. A critical view on more recent developments in feminism is Natasha Campo's *From Superwomen to Domestic Goddesses: The Rise and Fall of Feminism*.

Rosie the Riveter and Wonder Woman” (Inness, *Action Chicks* 2). Whereas this statement may be true considering the existence of women, who are considered physically strong and “tough,” these figures are rather exceptions from the rule and treated as such in public opinion. A few examples from American television between the 1950s and the 1970s may serve as exemplary evidence to the discrepancy of physical or supernatural power and social status of women.<sup>57</sup> In the 1950s there is not a single woman on American television who is either exceptionally strong in a physical sense or possesses supernatural powers. The most popular television actress at the time is Lucille Ball, who delivers comedic entertainment to the audiences in her *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) show. Though gifted with wit and creativity, the character Lucy is first and foremost depicted as a loyal wife to her band-leader husband Ricky, housewife and loving mother. The gender roles in this series are divided along traditional lines with the husband as bread-winner and the wife as caretaker and nurturer.<sup>58</sup> By the 1960s supernatural women have entered the American home via the television set. Samantha Stevens (*Bewitched*, 1964-1972), a witch, and the female genie Jeannie (*I Dream of Jeannie*, 1965-1970) charm men on the screen and audiences in their homes. Despite their magical abilities, however, the greatest aim of both figures is to please their husband or “master” respectively. In both cases the women’s powers do not make them superior socially or culturally, but rather they are portrayed as fiercely struggling for normalcy.

Women, who are physically strong, start appearing more frequently on American television in the 1970s. *The Bionic Woman* (1976-1978, a spin-off of the immensely popular *The Six Million Dollar Man*, 1974-1978, starring Lee Majors) uses her scientifically enhanced powers to work for the U.S. government as a secret agent. Even though Jaime Sommers, protagonist of the show, may outrun any criminal with her bionic legs or easily throw them out of a window with the help of her bionic arm, she does not challenge stereotypical gender roles very much. When she is not acting as an agent, Sommers teaches at the local high school. Her life is overshadowed by a lost romance and despite her extraordinary strength she relies strongly on her boss and fatherly friend Oscar Goldman in the completion of her missions and the managing of her private life. For Jaime Sommers, as much as for other seemingly brawny women on television in those days (e.g.

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<sup>57</sup> This paragraph can only touch on certain tendencies during the respective times and is not meant as a detailed analysis. It should rather be seen as the description of general trends to which the three selected shows of this study offer a stark contrast.

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of Lucille Ball and her show *I Love Lucy* see Stark, “I Love Lucy: The Woman as TV Superstar,” or Elisabeth Edwards’ *I Love Lucy: A Celebration of All Things Lucy*.



*Charlie's Angels*), the agency of the women is always limited and there is a strict code of conduct as to what is proper for a woman and what is not. One of the strongest regulating forces for the behavior of men and women at the time is heterosexuality (cf. Inness, *Action Chicks* 3).

Seeing more active women on American television screens in the 1970s can certainly be attributed, in part, to changes in the perception of women in society brought about by the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s. In tune with Civil Rights battles throughout the United States, women begin to actively question the gender roles and traditional value systems in which they were brought up. They feel the need to liberate themselves from old stereotypes and demand independence from men in general. Women of color and lesbian women become an active and visible part of the feminist movement, albeit without much representation on television, yet.<sup>59</sup> In American cultural and political life, however, “womanhood was no longer to be a term which referred primarily to the family sphere and little more outside of it, but it was to include work life, social engagement and equality of genders” (Horn 206).

On American television it takes until the 1980s for women to be regularly presented as part of the American work force. Crime drama had been an exclusively male dominated program area, but *Cagney & Lacey* (1981-1988), with its two female protagonists, challenges this tradition and becomes an enormous success. The show is centered on two New York City police detectives: Christine Cagney, a single, middle-class, career-oriented woman, and Mary Beth Lacey, a married mother from a working-class family. Cagney consciously puts her career before relationships with men, getting married, or establishing a family. Lacey is married with two children. Her life's focus is slightly more on her family than her job. Even though both women have different priorities in their life, neither lifestyle is portrayed as either especially positive or negative. Concentrating on a career brings on as many problems as having a family and working in a demanding job.

Another woman with a demanding job is portrayed by Candice Bergen in the successful comedy show *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998). Murphy Brown is an investigative reporter, and anchorwoman for a fictional television newsmagazine. Well over forty, a recovering alcoholic and single mother, Brown is shown as talented and resourceful, but also with an

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<sup>59</sup> A critical discussion of the internal problematics of the feminist movement of the second wave can be found, for example, in Lilian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*. Another detailed examination of feminist struggles by different ethnic groups at that time offers Benita Roth in her book *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*.

extremely problematic, not always likable, personality. The series soon becomes famous for integrating real political figures and journalists into its episodes. Just how much influence some audiences grant this show can be seen when, in 1992, Vice President Dan Quayle criticizes *Murphy Brown*'s television figure as "a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman – mocking the importance of a father, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another 'lifestyle choice'" (Forerunner). After a very public exchange of opinions between Bergen, Quayle and numerous journalists, *Murphy Brown* continued including bold and problematic storylines into its program.

Though definite changes in creation and representation of female protagonists are visible in the 1980s, American television presents us with series that are not so much calling into question traditional gender roles, family structures and social norms, but which simply re-arrange or reverse those. Still at the same time, those shows make honest attempts towards trying to deal more critically with the diversity of their contemporary audience. Both on television and in American society, women have successfully entered the public sphere. Nevertheless, the problematic need to prove themselves as successful career women and mothers to society becomes a struggle which continues until today.

Be it *Cagney & Lacey* or *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992), women slowly begin acquiring agency and contesting traditional gender role images. The majority of women in 1980s television are, however, not supernatural, or possess any bizarre powers. With the exception of some alien or half-alien characters on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), women appear in more realistic contexts.

In the early 1990s, American feminism is at a point where the communal struggles of the 1970s have lost much of their aggressive stamina, and a third wave of feminists grows up with women's rights firmly in place and greater freedom than their mothers or grandmothers. Consequently, feminism becomes more varied and focuses, for example, on multiracial aspects, but even more so, on individualism. American society is in a process of increasing diversification, and women from a wide range of backgrounds with different ideas and aims are an active part of this society. On the other hand the diversification of feminism leads to insecurity about the direction in which to go and the question whether there are any common goals left. Judith Butler comments on this dilemma of modern day feminism suggesting seeing complexity as opportunity:

The program of feminism is not one in which we might assume a common set of premises and then proceed to build in logical fashion a program from those premises.

Instead, this is a movement that moves forward precisely by bringing critical attention to bear on its premises in an effort to become more clear about what it means and to begin to negotiate the conflicting interpretations, the irrepressible democratic cacophony of its identity. As a democratic enterprise, feminism has had to forfeit the presumption that at base we can all agree about some things or, equivalently, to embrace the notion that each of our most treasured values are under contestation and that they will remain contested zones of politics. This may sound as if I am saying that feminism can never build from anything, that it will be lost to reflection upon itself, that it will never move beyond this self-reflective moment toward an active engagement with the world. On the contrary, it is precisely in the course of engaged political practices that these forms of internal dissension emerge. And I would argue emphatically that resisting the desire to resolve this dissension into unity is precisely what keeps the movement alive. (*Undoing Gender* 175)

Consequently, as much as American culture and society are in constant flux, so is the presentation of women on television. By the 1990s, women, who are physically and/or intellectually strong, possess supernatural powers and take their own agency for granted, have become standard fare for American television audiences. Shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are proving to audiences that the main protagonists do not need any male heroes to fight their wars for them, but that they can manage very well on their own. Female action heroes today use their physical and intellectual strengths, sometimes in combination with supernatural abilities, skills and/or gifts, to rescue those in need from a variety of evil forces or simply to save the world on a more or less regular basis. It is more than obvious that the variety of roles of women in popular entertainment have changed radically. Whereas women used to be portrayed as either frightened victims, evil antagonists or *femmes fatales*, who either had to be rescued by the strong and courageous male hero or be eliminated by him, today we are dealing with women whose heroic abilities to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves are not questioned. The idea that men and women are intellectually equal is presented as an accepted norm. Intellectual superiority of women is also something which is not uncommon.<sup>60</sup> Physical

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<sup>60</sup> In *Stargate SG1* (1997-2007) astrophysicist (Ph.D.) and engineer Major Samantha Carter is openly acknowledged to be more intelligent than her male colleagues, including her commanding officers (cf. "Lost City, Part 2" 7.22). *BtVS*'s Willow Rosenberg is not only a powerful witch, but also the first person everyone turns to, when comprehensive computer or academic skills are needed.

competence is expected and physical superiority is possible as well. The use of violence is accepted as needed, depending on the situation. Almost all contemporary television shows, and action movies feature women that are either highly proficient in fighting skills or on an intellectual basis, or most often, both. Indeed we have reached a point where audiences expect both genders to act and to be treated in a fairly similar manner: “women and men are usually equals in today's movies and TV shows; we raise an eyebrow when this isn't so” (Gauntlett 6). However, reaching this point was a long process and strongly shaped by feminist scholars in the 1970s and ‘80s.

### **Feminist Film Theory and the “male gaze”**

Influenced by the Civil Rights and Women’s Rights Movement, the 1970s mark the beginning of a widely discussed new field of research: feminist film theory. In her 1975 essay on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey uses Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories to examine classic Hollywood Cinema (mostly feature films of the 1950s and 1960s). She argues that women in these films are objectified by what she calls the “male gaze.” This male gaze comes threefold: in the gaze of the person behind the camera, that of the characters in the film and the gaze of the spectator, forced to look from a male perspective (cf. Mulvey, Visual Pleasure). The decidedly sexual “visual pleasure” is based on scopophilia, a voyeuristic pleasure gained from looking at something. Mulvey sees the male gaze as a defense against castration anxiety which only employs two stances when looking at women: “a sadistic-voyeuristic look, whereby the gazer salves his unpleasure at female lack by seeing the woman punished, and a fetishistic-scophilic look, whereby the gazer salves his unpleasure by fetishizing the female body in whole or part” (Glover 8). Consequently, Mulvey calls for a destruction of this male gaze and the end of the male/active, female/passive dichotomy presented in Hollywood features. Other feminist scholars, such as Linda Williams, B. Ruby Rich, Marjorie Rosen, Miriam Hansen or Molly Haskell, to name only a few, join the criticism of female objectification and widen the field of research into the role of women in American film. Seeing the critique of female representation as too narrow, African-American author and activist bell hooks argues that “the gaze” is not only informed by gender but also racial politics. She uses the idea of the “oppositional gaze” as a statement for black people to reclaim agency and to defy racial discrimination (cf. *Reel to real*). Feminist film theory of the late 1970s and early 1980s opens up new and valuable approaches to discussing the representation, objectification and politicization of the female body on American movie screens.

Thirty years later, the world of media has changed dramatically. Films are but one medium present in American culture. The appearance of video tapes first, and digitalization of film later, have radically altered the way in which audiences consume movies. Adding to that the enormous variety of television programs, including cable, pay-on-demand, and the revolution of televised programming by companies such as Netflix or Amazon, not to forget web-series on the Internet, the predominately passive “spectator” from the 1960s has become a media-savvy consumer who not only chooses what to watch from an extremely wide range of possible media, but is also able to interact consciously with the programs and products on television or computer screens. Even the producers of television content appraise their audience differently. With the multitude of channels and programs to choose from, producers must cater to the diversity of their viewers. Spigel claims that “[u]nlike the older three-network broadcast system, the new multichannel, multinational television system is based on ‘narrowcasting’ (programming designed for niche tastes and demographics)” (1212).

Feminist film theory today has become a fixed part of cultural studies, especially feminist cultural and media studies (cf. Spigel 1209): “feminist approaches have been so folded into the basic questioning of the field of film and media studies that it would be counterproductive to isolate them into a separate section” (Williams 1264). This progressive interdisciplinary approach to film and television offers advanced ways of thinking about television on a broader scale and “opens up questions that we might not ask within the confines of our own field” (Spigel 2012).

Even though the male gaze from classic Hollywood cinema can still be seen at times in modern entertainment, I would argue that there is a much broader spectrum of “gazes” and points of identification where gender plays a relatively inferior role. As far back as 1992, Carol Clover in her fascinating book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in Modern Horror Film* contends that a majority of horror movies guide young male viewers to identify with the victim or hero/victim who is often a woman in danger (Clover 8 f). She also says that identification for the audience is fluid and based primarily on the functions of the characters, such as hero, victim, psychopath, etc. (ibid.) and not on gender. Furthermore, the so-called “final girl”<sup>61</sup> is an active agent who defeats the subject of terror through her own

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<sup>61</sup> A typical trope in horror films where the last woman (or girl) alive faces the horrible killer and usually overcomes him. Thus, she is able to “tell” the story. Often, the “final girl” is a virgin which is a rather problematic paradigm and speaks to the confirmation of patriarchal power structures. There is numerous research on the figure of the “final girl” discussing this point, e.g., Clover or Irene Karras “The Third Wave’s Final Girl: Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”

resourcefulness (cf. Clover 17 ff.). Joss Whedon, creator of *BtVS*, consciously uses the stereotypical image of this “final girl,” young, blond and apparently helpless, to construct Buffy Summers as an alternative to the cliché of the classical victim figure of horror movies (cf. Battis, Middleton).

In agreement with Clover I would say that female action heroes in modern television series are not primarily constructed to absolve a male spectator from castration anxiety. Contemporary audiences have learned to read, deconstruct and interpret moving images and to actively engage with the presented content to a great extent. Viewers tend to identify with the hero or other characters depending on whether or not they like the person and their respective function in the film, not because of gender. There are many different ways of “grasping the ‘visual pleasures’ of moving images” (Williams 1268) and I think we should not limit our questions to “the psychoanalytic logic [...] of ‘sexual difference’” (ibid.) but include ethnicity, politics and other variables that guide our understanding of film and other media today. Therefore, in this study, I will not concentrate on an analysis of “gazes” in the selected television series and individual episodes but on the various possibilities of constructing characters of different genders according to their function.

### Aesthetics

Though we may have come to accept the increasingly equal treatment of men and women on television, there are still certain codes of conduct, or more precisely, of appearance, which seem to be strangely indispensable to being a contemporary television hero.<sup>62</sup>

At first glance it might seem curious that female action heroes in contemporary films and television shows are apparently so easily accepted by audiences; audiences most certainly not exclusively consisting of women, whom one might expect to enjoy watching “girl power”<sup>63</sup> on the screen, but also many male viewers take pleasure in following the adventures of *BtVS* week after week (cf. Parpat). Naturally, one of the pleasures of watching women “kick butt” is the highly stylized physical appearance of the protagonists. Buffy Summers, for example, is always well coiffed with an unerring fashion sense. Sarah Michelle Gellar, who plays Buffy in the series, has an extremely well trained body which

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<sup>62</sup> Though I would argue that the outer appearance in showbusiness is important to male actors as well, there is much more lenience for male actors to deviate from the prescribed Hollywood norms of attractiveness, in physical appearance or age, and still be successful, e.g. Danny DeVito, Steve Buscemi, Ron Perlman, etc. The number of successful actresses who do not fit the “standard” Hollywood picture of beauty is slightly more difficult.

<sup>63</sup> An expression which became popular in the 1990s and is related to third-wave feminism, referring to the empowerment of women, especially women taking up agency. For more on this term see Early/Kennedy, *Athena's Daughters*, or Innes, *Action Chicks*.

allows her to convincingly portray the Slayer who hits and kicks demons to an ugly pulp with acrobatic grace. Even more pronounced perhaps is the physical development of Reneé O'Connor, playing Xena's companion Gabrielle on *XWP*. Whereas in the first season of the show Gabrielle is pictured as a dreamy country girl, her lines soft, her physique slender and not overly muscular, wearing long skirts and fluffy blouses, this image as well as the body of the actress changes radically throughout the six seasons of the show. Not only do Gabrielle's blouses and skirts become increasingly shorter, but her muscles, especially her biceps and abs, become extremely prominent and are shown off through form fitting and rather revealing costumes.<sup>64</sup>

Observing this we are led to consider three things: 1. The image of femininity and beauty in American society has changed drastically over the past few years, 2. The expectation of society and culture regarding the codification of women's and men's bodies are stronger than ever, and 3. Codifying the body has become part of an individual's identification process.

The definition of what a beautiful female body looks like today is more varied than ever. In the 1970s and 1980s the physical ideal for women were slender bodies, with supple lines, and mostly presenting a traditional, if not stereotypical, image of femininity. This can, for example, be seen in *Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981). For all the fighting the Angels did, they would mostly rely on their guns and their wits to solve a case. One would rarely see them working out in a gym, to build up their physical strength along with their abs and biceps. Instead the opening credits focused more on the women's fluffy hair-dos than their crime fighting abilities.

One of the most radical changes from that image came with Warrant Officer Ellen Ripley and the *Alien* franchise movies. Suddenly, there is this woman running around in a dirty, sweaty and blood-stained tank top, showing off her muscles and her gun, and blasting away monsters without hesitation to save her crew, her ship and herself. For the first time, a female action hero "demonstrated that women did not have to look as though they stepped directly from a beauty parlor when they battled foes" (Innes 3). This new trend was taken to a whole new level with the release of *Terminator 2* in 1991. One of the first scenes of the films depicts Linda Hamilton, who reprises her role of Sarah Connor from the first *Terminator* movie in 1984, doing pull ups in the cell of a mental institution.

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<sup>64</sup> Whatever reasons for the physical change of the character Gabrielle were given within the narrative, a highly probable marketing consideration was to give the male audiences yet another attractive, blond character which they could appreciate.

Her body is all sinew and muscle, her demeanor tough and her spirit unbreakable. Reminiscent of a vast number of Hollywood films in which male heroes in prisons are working out to retain shape and strength, Sarah Connor is building up her muscles to ensure both physical strength and power as well as showing off her enormous mental discipline. This supports and emphasizes Innes's claim that since the beginning of the 1990s we can see that "a whole new tough aesthetic is emerging for women, one in which it is praiseworthy for them to be more muscular and aggressive than in the past" (5). The flip side to this trend of women creating a more muscular and powerful body for themselves is that expectations, especially in the media, are extremely high: "If female stars do not begin with impressive physiques, they are forced by media pressure to gain them by pursuing grueling routines worthy of the marines" (ibid. 4). However, this "whole new" aesthetics is not confined to women in film and television, but women everywhere have joined gyms and taken up martial arts, weight lifting and other sports formerly considered solely for men. In pursuing these sports women also pursue an ideal image of femininity and beauty. Innes argues that this ideal is a drastic change from the 1970s and 1980s "when young, fashionable women did not want too-visible muscles and worried that weight lifting would make them overly muscular. Now, these same women lament if their biceps do not bulge or they do not have six-pack stomachs" (4). Again, it is interesting that society creates and accepts these new ideals of beauty for women rather effortlessly. However, at the same time adjustments to classic standards for the outward appearance of men are approached only hesitantly, as we will see below.

Roland Barthes observed in the 1980s that "there is a social prohibition against the feminization of men, there is almost none against the masculinization of women" (Barthes, *Fashion* 257). Nevertheless, the social pressure for both men and women to mold their bodies into a certain shape in order to be considered outstanding, in case of celebrities, or attractive and desirable, in case of society as a whole, is dramatic.

### **Gender, Sexuality and Identity**

Fashioning the body into culturally set norms is not simply pressure from the outside. Myra Macdonald holds that:

rigorous bodily discipline becomes the substitute route for regaining the homology of image and identity that would otherwise be lost. 'Feeling good' involves, for the postfeminist woman, success in career, sexual life and appearance: in all three cases, nothing is to be achieved without hard work and commitment. (200-201)



Remarkably, the process of shaping and codifying the body into culturally acknowledged forms of “femininity” is hardly ever seen within a negative context. The pain, the sweat and the exhausting work that goes into becoming or staying fit is most often hailed as a valuable part of life which necessarily increases a woman’s (or man’s) overall sense of well-being. Macdonald explains that “[f]ar from being cast within a paradigm of self-denial or rigorous and painful discipline, losing weight is part of a positive discourse about responding to a challenge, making the most of yourself and feeling good” (206). Whereas some feminist writers such as Naomi Wolf detect a conspiracy in this “beauty myth,” the idealizing of particular physiques, with the aim to suppress feminist achievements, others, such as Angela McRobie and Elizabeth Wilson are positively convinced that “the opportunities that women take in their own lives to play with the codes of fashion and appearance ... create new and liberating meanings for themselves” (ibid. 192).

The idea of women creating new meanings and, subsequently, new identities for themselves seems not too far-fetched as the new models of beauty and femininity coincide discursively with women breaking into jobs formerly reserved for men:

In the workplace, women demonstrated that they could be tough and aggressive. They became soldiers, police officers, fire fighters, and construction workers – all jobs that had been considered too rough for ‘ladies.’ In addition, women demanded more authority and power in the workplace; they wanted to demonstrate that they were tough enough to handle even the most stressful and demanding jobs, from CEO to Congress member. (Inness 5-6)

In gaining the physical appearance to generate strength and authority “women are challenging the male monopoly on power and aggression, a shift that has broad ramifications for how gender is constructed” (Jones 149). Our contemporary society is much more aware of how processes of image construction function (cf. Macdonald 200), and yet never before has the idea of particular appearances of one’s body been more important to the creation of identity for women. Indeed, Macdonald is convinced that “[t]he materiality of the body, which women feel to be such an intrinsic part of their own subjectivity, becomes a detachable asset, malleable to whatever aspirational purpose postfeminist woman chooses” (202).

The process for women of finding new places and developing new types of identities is complex and very much concentrated on the individual. But, if women are breaking into areas formerly reserved for men, then what happens to the image of men; both in terms of

their place in society, and the development of personal identity? Sociologist David Gauntlett argues that the problem many men seem to have with the new presence of women in social and cultural life is not so much adjusting to seeing and accepting women in different spaces, but the inability to give up traditional ideas of gender roles concerning themselves: “men’s troubles stemmed from their exaggerated and pointless commitment to men’s *old* role, the traditional role of provider and strong, emotionless rock” (Gauntlett 250, emphasis Gauntlett). So, when in the 1990s women start to regularly appear as physical and emotional equals to men, we can observe a trend of “reinventing masculinity as fatherhood and caring” (ibid. 65). The man as father and/or emotional support for his friends, especially in cases where the circle of friends serves as a “modern replacement for the traditional family” (ibid. 59), becomes ever more apparent in media and advertisement. This “new” type of man is exemplified by the above mentioned Xander Harris from *BtVS*, but they can also be seen in other television shows of widely varying genres such as the sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004), the family drama *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* (1996-2007), or the sci-fi adventure *Babylon 5* (1994-1998). In 1978, psychologist Nancy Chodorow had determined that “the way that males and females are brought up in our society teaches males to find their identity in goals and achievements and females to find theirs in relationships with other people” (Fiske, *Culture* 213). Now, in the 1990s and early 2000s this statement has been challenged by the media as well as American culture in general.

As already mentioned above, sexuality plays a big role in shaping individual identity. However, as much as traditional gender roles have been restructured in terms of cultural spaces and aesthetics since the 1990s, sexual diversity is of increasing importance in Western culture and society. Ever so carefully the media, especially television, have taken on the idea that homosexual, bi-sexual or transgender characters are part of every-day life. Even though American culture seems rather ambivalent about the acceptance of homosexuality<sup>65</sup>, there has been evidence of the gradual acknowledgement of a wider variety of sexual orientations in society which is also shown in television series. The short-lived *My So-Called Life* (1994-1995) was one of the first television shows to introduce a recurring gay character. Enrique Vasquez, best friend to teen protagonist Angela Chase, is not only bi-racial, with a Hispanic and African American background, but also gay. In the further course of the series we are introduced to an English teacher at Angela’s school,

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<sup>65</sup> A Gallup survey has shown that “the number of people willing to agree that ‘homosexuality should be considered an acceptable alternative lifestyle’ has risen from 38 per cent in 1992 to 52 per cent in 2001. However, disagreement was high at 43 per cent” (Gauntlett, *Media* 13).

who is openly gay, and serves as a mentor for young Enrique. However, acceptance of gay characters is still extremely problematic at this time. The popular ABC sitcom *Ellen* (1994-1998) starring Ellen DeGeneres as a neurotic thirty-something book store owner in search of the perfect romantic relationship, is killed off quickly, when actress Ellen DeGeneres comes out as a lesbian both in real life and with the character on her show. The immediate result of Ellen's coming out is that ABC labels the sitcom PG-14. On top of that a "parental discretion" warning is shown before each new episode airs (cf. Tucker). After increasing differences with ABC, the suddenly controversial *Ellen* is cancelled after its 5<sup>th</sup> season.<sup>66</sup> Yet, only one year later NBC opens the door for more gay characters. The highly successful sitcom *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) centers on the gay lawyer Will Truman and his best friend Grace Adler, a heterosexual interior designer. The series also features Will's gay friend Jack McFarland as regular part of the ensemble. For the first time, American television produces a show where one or more of the main characters are homosexual as part of the show's premise. The popular and critical success of this show can both be measured by its eight-year long run and the continually high ratings, as well as by *Will & Grace* carrying home 16 Emmy Awards, out of a total of 83 nominations.<sup>67</sup>

But even outside the sitcom genre, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender characters have become part of American television narratives. In dramas, such as *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), *The L Word* (2004-2009), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-) or soap operas like *The Bold and Beautiful* (1982-), *As the World Turns* (1956-2010) and *Days of Our Lives* (1968-2012), sexual diversity is gradually becoming part of everyday television life in the United States.

Whether or not the gradual visibility of sexual diversity is a sign for increasing acceptance may be arguable, however, it is strong evidence for yet another change in the construction of gender and gender roles in American society. Desperately searching for new labels and new identity constructions, the term "metrosexuality" has appeared in American and other Western cultures. Metrosexual men are commonly understood as heterosexual men who are very conscious of and concerned about their looks, fashion, etc. Heightened awareness of style used to be considered typically gay and effeminate, but

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<sup>66</sup> It should be noted that today (2013) Ellen DeGeneres's *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (2003-) is among the most popular American daytime television talk shows. The popularity of DeGeneres as an actress and comedian was additionally confirmed when she hosted the Emmy Awards in 2001 and the Academy Awards in 2007 and 2014.

<sup>67</sup> For a full list of nominations and awards for *Will & Grace* see the Internet Movie Database: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0157246/awards>.

today metrosexuality often stands for a modern, successful and widely appreciated lifestyle. Mark Simpson who first brought the term “metrosexual” into main stream media in 1994 explains this development:

Gay men provided the early prototype for metrosexuality. Decidedly single, definitely urban, dreadfully uncertain of their identity (hence the emphasis on pride and the susceptibility to the latest label) and socially emasculated, gay men pioneered the business of accessorizing—and combining—masculinity and desirability (Simpson 1).

Television creators have quickly become aware of the fact that attitudes and definitions of masculinity are very much in flux, and shows such as the above mentioned *Will & Grace* are evidence of this. Perhaps an even stronger confirmation of changing notions of masculinity is the highly successful and popular reality TV-show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2012), in which five gay men serve as life-stylists for awkward heterosexual men.

The idea that gender and sexuality do not have fixed meanings, but that female/male, woman/man dichotomies, along with expectations of appearance and behavior have become ever more arbitrary has been discussed for several decades, with the media and advertising industry pushing the limits. When Calvin Klein started the advertising campaign for his perfume *CK One* “for a man or a woman,” in the mid-nineties, he “reminded viewers of the similarity of genders, hinting that it wouldn’t matter which of the attractive male or female models you chose to desire” (Gauntlett, *Media* 254). To emphasize the similarity of genders, the campaign deliberately chose models whose gender could not be determined at first glance. In a 1995 commercial for *CK One* the androgynous model Jenny Shimizu appears on the screen in jeans and a white t-shirt, her hair cropped short, tattoos on her arm, and the voice-over explains: “the male one, the female one ... a fragrance for everyone” (*CK One* #3). Only when the model herself states the name of the product *CK One* in a sultry, yet distinctly female voice, the viewer will know that the person she sees is most probably a woman.

Scholars such as Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler have long discussed the importance of sexuality in the creation of a personal identity. Foucault, in his 1978 *History of Sexuality, Vol.1* considers the relationship of power, body and sexuality. Examining the treatment of sexuality throughout several centuries, Foucault notes that sexuality had been used by various instances of authority (e.g. patriarchal relations, social

relations, or religion) to exert power over people, especially women. As the use of this power and the intended goals change depending on time and place, Foucault suggests that the way bodies and sexuality are regarded are culturally and socially constructed ideas and not biologically fixed components (cf. *History*). Feminist scholars sometimes feel that Foucault's ideas are somewhat problematic as he does not grant any agency to the (female) bodies (cf. Armstrong 1).

Transcending binary constructs of male/female which Foucault uses in his history, Julia Kristeva suggests that

the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to metaphysics. What can 'identity,' even 'sexual identity,' mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged. [...] What I mean is, first of all, the demassification of the problematic of difference, which would imply, in a first phase, an apparent de-dramatization of the 'fight to the death' between rival groups and thus between the sexes (*Women's Time* 34).

Continuing notions of breaking up basic dichotomies in gender perception, Judith Butler's theories on the performativity of gender identity (cf. *Gender Trouble*, *Undoing Gender*) have been perhaps the strongest influences on gender and queer theory in the past twenty years. Butler upholds that "male" or "female" are markedly arbitrary and can only be understood in relation to specific times, places and individuals:

Terms such as 'masculine' and 'feminine' are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending upon geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose. That the terms recur is interesting enough, but the recurrence does not index a sameness, but rather the way in which the social articulation of the term depends upon its repetition, which constitutes one dimension of the performative structure of gender. Terms of gender designation are thus never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade (*Undoing Gender* 10).

Aside from being arbitrary, gender, and consequently identity, according to Butler, is never a fixed state but is performed depending on a particular person in a particular situation and time. Gender is acted out and continuously varies regarding the audience of this act at any given period of time:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (*Gender Trouble* 140-141).

Therefore, if gender is performative and identity is an act prone to changes from one moment to the next, then the construction of gendered individuals in fiction is probably even more complex and full of options than performing gender in real life. If we look at modern television shows, characters have the opportunity to act and look any which way regarding gender and identity. In this study I would like to ask the question, which role, if any, do gender and sexuality play for the creation and the function of television heroes? Or more specifically, how is gender constructed and performed in the selected television shows I am examining, and how can we interpret social conventions regarding gender, sexuality and identity in American television at the turn of the millennium?

## Chapter 3: The Hero Figure in American Television Series

*I need a hero  
I'm holding out for a hero 'till the end of the  
night  
He's gotta be strong  
And he's gotta be fast  
And he's gotta be fresh from the fight*

*I need a hero  
I'm holding out for a hero 'till the morning light  
He's gotta be sure  
And it's gotta be soon  
And he's gotta be larger than life*  
--- Bonnie Tyler, *Holding Out for a Hero*  
(1984)

As mentioned in the introduction above, the hero figure is essential in the analysis of the selected television series. The hero, as will be examined in more detail in this chapter, is a representative of his/her culture and society at a particular point in time. In traditional Western storytelling, heroes saving the world have almost always been male.<sup>68</sup> If we study the female protagonists of *BtVS*, *XWP* and *WB*, we need to determine whether they present a completely new type of hero or if classical elements have simply been projected onto heroic characters of a different gender. We also need to consider whether gender has any particular impact on the way modern television creators envision heroes and present them to their audiences. Consequently, in this chapter I am going to discuss the function of heroic figures in contemporary Western, more specifically, American discourse. Since my primary aim is the examination of female action heroes in modern television shows, the investigation of the function of heroes will be targeted primarily at action hero characters in American television. Aside from their purpose I will also outline some major changes in the depiction of hero figures in American television over the past 30 years, in order to illustrate the development from male-centered narratives to a stronger diversification and questioning of characters and genders. In particular, I would like to point out those changes that reveal increasing interest in the emotional and psychological investments of the heroes as well as the move towards a more troubled, less self-assured hero figure. In order to

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<sup>68</sup> Some notable exceptions might be the British Boudica, leading a revolt against the Roman conquerors around 60 A.D., or Jean of Arc. Incidentally, both of these historical figures are mentioned in *WB* as predecessors of the contemporary bearer of the Witchblade. The history of Boudica has also been used in an episode of *XWP* (cf. "The Deliverer", 3.04).

answer the question if female action heroes in contemporary television series are created differently from their male counterparts, I will focus mainly on Campbell's theories concerning the archetypal hero. The elements in the "journey of the archetypal hero," which Campbell established, can still be observed in contemporary Western hero figures. Therefore, since Campbell provides the theoretical "mold" for heroic characters, his findings are the frame against which any developments will be inspected.



### ***3.1 Changing Features and Functions of the Action Hero in American Television***<sup>69</sup>

Bonnie Tyler's impassionate plea "Holding Out for a Hero" in the mid-1980s reminded the world of the requirements for the ideal type of hero of Western civilization: he would be male, strong, capable to prevail in physical combat, self-assured, and, as if that were not enough yet, larger than life itself. The years that have passed since Tyler's song reached #2 in the UK and #34 in the US charts, do not seem to have changed our perception of which qualities a hero should possess overly much – or have they?

#### **The Function of a Hero as a Cultural Role Model**

The larger than life heroic figure Bonnie Tyler was singing about in 1984 is but another representation of a particular mythological figure which in today's language would closely resemble the character type of the "action hero." Western culture knows some of the earliest of these types of "action heroes" from different mythologies with characters like Heracles, Ulysses, Cúchulainn, Siegfried, etc. All of them qualify as heroes as they possess traits like superhuman strength, cunning and the ability to overcome tremendous obstacles in order to fulfill a variety of quests. Their narratives are filled with fantastic journeys that test their abilities and prove their worth as heroes. Heroes may suffer for a greater good, transcend boundaries of knowledge and/or fight against monsters which often function as representations of the fears of their contemporaries. But in the end the heroes will usually overcome all obstacles and celebrate their victories. As such they serve as role models, propagating particular values or promoting national identities within their respective societies.

Often, heroes are created as an acknowledgment of a deeper psychological aspect of human existence and the search for knowledge and solution of problems. Unlike the average man or woman, a classical hero is capable of dealing with problems of the everyday world, at the same time offering models of behavior and ultimately solutions that can be negotiated, adapted and implemented by society or different groups within society. We should not, however, assume that heroes are necessarily always entirely positive figures. Lévi-Strauss has made clear that these characters are not always "good," i.e., in a

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<sup>69</sup> As this study is focused on the three action hero figures, Xena, Buffy and Sara Pezzini, other types of heroes such as the tragic hero or the anti-hero, will only be mentioned in passing.

moral and/or ethical sense. In fact they may possess diverse character traits, both “evil” and “good,” in order to be able to differentiate their actions and provide guidance to their social group.<sup>70</sup> Scholars see the role of heroes in our Western culture as:

part of a perceptual system of a culture through which unfamiliar situations, originating either within culture or outside it, are interpreted and fitted into old symbolic molds. In helping to pattern the relationships among basic beliefs, values, and behaviors that organize social interaction, [heroes] produce common social understanding of new social conditions (Breen and Corcoran 14).

Every society is in a constant dynamic process of reproducing itself, and heroes contribute to this reproduction of values. Their contemporary importance becomes even more crucial if we consider on which basis Western society today negotiates values and norms. Many current-day heroes who provide us with models of community and culture are a product of popular culture, especially, film and television, sometimes computer games and the Internet.

This ostensibly dubious origin is why Marxist critics warn us to beware of the power that may lie within the hero figure. They argue that the dominant classes of society may use the positive or negative image of a hero figure to maliciously indoctrinate underprivileged groups of society:

The hero expresses and is used to mediate in a lived system of meaning and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It [the hero figure] thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute, because experienced, reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a ‘culture’, but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes (Williams 110).

Of course, the reason for having heroes, as Williams has pointed out, is to act as a symbol and model of beliefs, values and behavior norms. Naturally, all of these ideas will be influenced by the creator of a particular hero and therefore cannot be objective. Even though Williams’s warning that heroes might be consciously exploited should not be totally discarded. We need to be aware of the fact that today we are offered such a

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<sup>70</sup> See chapter 1.2 Myth Criticism, Archetypal Criticism and Methodology.

multitude of types of heroes that we have a choice of accepting some and rejecting others, especially when it comes to films and television: “Mainstream motion pictures are modern myths: They create hero models according to the dominant culture of the society, but it is not the only one possible” (Hofstede, 78). Of course, the same is true for television productions.

A short example from a television series will neatly illustrate how hero figures can be created to fit a dominant culture, but can at the same time be interpreted in a more diverse way, addressing social issues and offering potential resolutions.

In the late 1960s, the United States had entered an age of anxiety. Firmly entrenched in the Cold War, Arms and Space Race, disrupted by the Civil Rights and the Women’s Movement, America was heading towards great changes. It is no wonder that Western shows like *Gunsmoke*, *Wagon Train* or *Bonanza* were hugely popular on television at the time. Set in a time when “good” and “bad” were clearly distinguishable, they presented a nostalgic version of the American spirit. *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza* featured strong male action heroes, firm with weapons and bad guys. *Wagon Train* concentrated on the pioneer spirit with which a group of travelers pursued happiness heading west. In this time of apprehension of what the future – or even the present – might bring, Gene Roddenberry developed his science-fiction series *Star Trek*. To be able to sell his idea to the studio bosses Roddenberry established *Star Trek* as a classic adventure drama, a science-fiction Western show, calling it “Wagon Train to the Stars” (cf. Day). Evoking American myths such as the Frontier, freedom, rugged individualism, technological progress and optimism, Captain James Tiberius Kirk was a true American hero, leading his crew and his country into space. Kirk’s Americanness was not only founded in his being from solid, mid-western Iowa, but also in his energetic approach towards discovery and dealing with “new life and new civilizations.” Even though in the *Star Trek* universe the most crucial command of the Federation, called the “Prime Directive,” which could perhaps be read as an anti-Monroe Doctrine, prohibits any involvement in alien affairs, Kirk consciously breaks this directive whenever he feels his actions will lead to a favorable solution in the spirit of democracy and humanity.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> In the *Star Trek* Episode “The Cloud Minders” (3.21), for example, Kirk decides to become involved in an interplanetary dispute, where one faction, the inhabitants of Statos, a floating city, is able to lead a luxurious life by exploiting another faction, the Troglytes. These Troglytes have to mine the mineral zenite on which the wealth of Statos depends. However, Doctor McCoy discovers that the raw zenite is attacking the Troglytes’ health. At this point, Kirk chooses to ignore the Prime Directive and helps the Troglytes.

However, in spite of the boisterous American hero that was Kirk, Roddenberry was intent on pushing the boundaries of traditional storytelling. His first move was to people his spaceship *Enterprise* with a crew of outstanding diversity: an African-American woman as communications officer, a Japanese American navigator, the half-Vulcan Mr. Spock as the first officer, and most notably for the time, the second season of the show brought a Russian crewmember onboard. Still, it was important that the leader, the captain of the ship was a white Anglo-Saxon male. What could on the one hand be read as an affirmation of American leadership of the world community could on the other hand be seen as an appeal to respect your fellow man – and woman – no matter what color their skin was or where they came from. As a matter of fact, this outstanding diversity has often been cited as one of the biggest attractions to the show: “The multi-ethnic nature of the bridge crew as well as its positive message that humanity would survive and thrive among the stars is often credited by writers, fans, and historians for the show’s broad appeal” (Day) The triumvirate Kirk, Spock, and McCoy can be interpreted as traditional American heroes (except perhaps for Spock’s pointy ears), reaching out into the stars to “boldly go where no man has gone before.” But at the same time, the topics that were broached in the show, e.g. slavery, warfare or discrimination, demonstrate a great concern with the contemporary political and social unrest of the United States in the late 1960s. In boldly facing and swiftly dealing with the troubles ahead, *Star Trek* presented an idealistic, but positive image of the future: “At its most basic level, *Star Trek* had a simple humanistic message: *humanity will be okay*” (ibid.).

The heroes of *Star Trek* are exemplary in their mission of dealing with contemporary issues such as race, intolerance, and inhumanity.<sup>72</sup> Kirk and his crew underline the importance of heroic figures as an indicator of the social and cultural discourses at the time of his or her creation and as herald for suggestions on how to deal with difficult topics in society. Nevertheless, as much as a particular society is caught up in a continuous process of change, so necessarily the heroes, who symbolize the renegotiation of culture, must change. These changes, which can be observed in the presentation of hero figures on American television over the past 30 years, will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

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<sup>72</sup> On a critical note one could add that even though *Star Trek* introduced several female officers, crewmembers and other characters, traditional gender roles were usually not questioned, and women’s tasks were relatively non-threatening to their male colleagues. The two most prominent female crewmembers on the USS Enterprise, Lt. Uhura and Christine Chapel, hold positions which had for a long time been seen as acceptable for women. Lt. Uhura as communications officer can easily be read as the modern version of a telephone switchboard operator. Christine Chapel is the head nurse on the spaceship, and thus works in a profession traditional for women since the 1910s.

### **Changes in the Classical Image of the Action Hero: Emotions and Psychology, the Rise of Women, and a Troubled Hero Figure**

Think of a classic example of a Western hero: the Greek Heracles. What is it that makes him a hero? Which qualities does he possess that have kept his tales popular for more than 2,000 years? As a half-god, Heracles is extraordinarily strong, he slays lions and bulls and hydras, captures hinds and boars, and is traditionally portrayed wearing a lion skin and carrying a huge club. However, he is clever as well, he needs and uses cunning when it comes to fetching the apples of the Hesperides, which he does by tricking their guardian Atlas into getting the apples for him. Most of the time, however, we can say that Heracles reaches his aims through the use of force. The qualities he demonstrates throughout his journeys are physical strength, agility, courage, cunning, masculinity, etc. It is quite obvious that the tale of Heracles is a narrative of violence: a tradition of violence which is visible throughout Western storytelling. The hero Bonnie Tyler was singing about in the mid-1980s still seems to represent the image of such a type of hero. As a matter of fact, it appears that American culture in the 1980s seemed to favor male action heroes that were strong, did not shy away from using excessive violence, and were always able to overcome adversaries easily recognizable as evil. Evidence to this is, for example, the enormous number of action heroes that the American movie<sup>73</sup> and television industry brought forth at the time.

### **Emotional Investment and Cultural Discourse**

American television of the 1980s created hero figures such as Thomas Magnum in *Magnum, P.I.* (1980-88) which portrays the sunny life of this Hawaiian-based private investigator. Employed as a security specialist by the mysterious, and ever absent, multi-millionaire Robin Masters, Magnum lives comfortably on Masters' estate, drives Masters'

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<sup>73</sup> As this study is primarily concerned with American television I will concentrate on examples from this particular medium. However, if we observe products of the American movie industry at the same time we will find a similar type of action hero. Some examples from the most successful action films of the 1980s are heroes such as Rocky Balboa (*Part III*, 1982 and *IV* 1985), John Rambo (1982, 1985, 1988), John McClane, hero of the *Die Hard* movies (1988, 1990, 1995, 2007), or the rather unusual hero, academically successful archeologist Indiana Jones (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 1981; *The Temple of Doom*, 1984; *The Last Crusade*, 1989, *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, 2008). *The Terminator* (1984) gave the world another uncommon type of hero. Even though the Terminator cyborg, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, was initially constructed as the "bad guy" in the first movie, this particular figure became so popular with the audiences that it returned in 1991, however, this time as a helper and even father figure to those he had terrorized previously.

red Ferrari, and solves cases with his two best friends, Theodore “TC” Calvin, a helicopter tour guide and Orville “Rick” Wright, a club manager. As a former Navy SEAL and Vietnam veteran, Magnum uses his skills, his charms and often weapons to catch smugglers, killers and other criminals, and to seduce a multitude of women, usually clients or victims in his cases.

A big GMC truck, courage, and a good dose of luck is what Colt Seavers, protagonist of the series *The Fall Guy* (1981-86), needs for both his jobs: stunt man and bounty hunter. As the head of a team, consisting of Seavers’ cousin Howie Munson and his beach-blond protégé Jodie Banks, the “unknown stuntman” employs his knowledge of stunts to catch criminals who have skipped bail. The formula of the series is fairly simple: stunts, cars and pretty women.

Big, fast and powerful cars are apparently essential for the TV action hero of the 1980s. Sometimes, in fact, the cars are even the protagonists and stars of the show, as in *Knight Rider* (1982-86). The *Knight Industries Two Thousand*, or for short K.I.T.T., is a sleek, black Pontiac whose artificial intelligence can easily match (or likely surpass) that of his driver Michael Knight. Equipped with countless gadgets K.I.T.T. and Knight are on a mission to apprehend those criminals who “operate above the law,” i.e., cases where the police or other law enforcement agencies are either helpless or unwilling to act.

On a similar level *The A-Team* (1983-87), four former members of a US Army Special Forces squad, who are on the run from the military police and now working as mercenaries, help those who cannot help themselves. The team’s clients are often poor, or cannot contact the police, or have contacted the authorities, but have found no help there. Even though weapons, cars, and other types of heavy machinery are part and parcel on the journey to success for the A-Team, the violence displayed is of an exaggerated, campy manner. In spite of exploding cars, intense exchanges of bullets or other violent acts, no one ever seems to get seriously hurt.

All these television shows that were just mentioned focus on fight and action sequences with fast cars, big guns, and dangerous stunts. They all feature one or more traditional male hero figure(s), who employ force, cunning, and sometimes charms and good looks, to be successful in their particular quests or professions and, of course, with the ladies.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Women in these shows are usually either clients or romantic interests. In *The Fall Guy* the only notable and recurring characters of women who do not fall into these categories are bale bondswoman Terri Michaels, who usually provides bountyhunter Colt Seavers with his cases, and, to some extent, Seavers’ young colleague Jodie. In *Knight Rider* the chief technician for the car K.I.T.T. was a Dr. Bonnie Barstow, the only woman with some agency. The *A-Team* was in contact with female reporters Amy Allen (first and half of

In order to have a popular show or movie that will draw a big audience and make money, however, it is important that the hero figure is likable and can usually be identified as the “good guy.” One way to make a hero likable is to provide a certain insight into the emotional state of the hero and taking the viewer on the journey of the hero dealing with his troubles. This is a definite change from the traditional action hero figure which we might find in classical narratives such as in that of Heracles. Even though the reader of Heracles’s adventures is informed of various marriages and relationships with eromenoi,<sup>75</sup> which might show emotional involvement of the hero, only in the case of his third wife Deianira do we find that emotions are part of the heroic tale which ends with the death of the mortal side of Heracles and him becoming a full god, marrying Hebe, the goddess of youth. However, the emphasis in those classic narratives is usually on the strength and the deeds of the fighting hero and emotional concerns are not usually presented as problematic, or function as an instrument to make the hero more human or likable and/or to identify with more easily.

Since the 1980s a more sensitive side of the hero has become pronounced: an action hero will have a “family,” a wife/girlfriend/romantic interest, or a sidekick/friend with whom he interacts and whom he is emotionally attached to. Colt Seavers’ cousin Howie Munson is often depicted as well-meaning, but clumsy and thus leading the protagonists into problematic situations which eventually will be solved by the hero Seavers. The difference between the heroic and experienced Seavers and his immature cousin is also emphasized in their appearance. Seavers embodies rugged individualism, wearing mostly jeans, sturdy shirts, boots, a leather jacket, and a base cap, representing the city-smart cowboy. His clothes usually feature colors such as deep blues, reds, white and black. Munson often tries to emulate his older cousin concerning behavior and dress, but not always successfully, as he continues to look and act, like an upper-middle-class college student. Seavers’s pride and joy is his pick-up truck that he uses to perform stunts while hunting the bad guys. While Seavers is quite content with letting his colleague and protégé Jodie drive the truck, he hardly ever grants this privilege to his cousin. Nevertheless, the fact that Munson is family means more to Seavers than the troubles he might create. As much as Seavers is a father figure to his often adolescent-acting cousin, he takes on a similar responsibility for his young protégé Jodie. The emotional ties that bind the

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second season), later with Tawnia Baker. Mostly these characters were used to provide the A-Team with cases, and often enough served as a “damsel in distress” plot device, when they had to be rescued.

<sup>75</sup> Male lovers, as Plutarch reports in his *Eroticos*.

characters are frequently a fundamental point of interest for the audience. The main characters of *Magnum, P.I.* and *The A-Team* are connected by strong bonds of friendship. Though not related by blood, their common experiences in the Vietnam War make their relationships quite as important as family ties. In focusing on the hero's more sensitive side, viewers may better be able to identify with, and feel attached to the heroes and their friends.

Another factor that has the hero appear in a positive light is the type of "quest" that he is on. Usually, the hero will be trying to catch a "bad guy" and/or help someone in need. Whether it is a particular person or the whole world which the hero is trying to save is not important as such. What should be emphasized, however, is that he uses his strength and knowledge to fight for others. And, in most cases, the quest can easily be read not merely as a plot device, but as a reflection of culture and society at a particular time. One example of a very obvious concern with contemporary social and cultural events is the *A-Team's* episode "Children of Jamestown." Two years before this particular episode of the *A-Team* aired, the famous Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh or Osho, as he would later call himself, bought a 64,000 acre ranch in Oregon and set up a commune in which thousands of followers gathered to live according to Bhagwan's teachings and provide him with the means for his Rolls Royce collection of 93 cars.<sup>76</sup> In January 1983 "The Children of Jamestown" shows the heroes of the *A-Team* being hired by a concerned father whose daughter has been captured by a fanatic religious community. Naturally, they rescue the daughter, even though the team is shortly detained by the cult. However, they escape by using their skills in engineering and mechanics and build weapons out of metal scraps. The episode "Children of Jamestown" can easily be read as an answer to the anxiety with which new religious, spiritual and philosophical movements, very much *en vogue* in the 1970s and '80s, were viewed in the United States. One way to deal with these fears is shown in the *A-Team*. The daughter of the customer is forcefully extracted from the cult, and the four members of the *A-Team*, who represent more traditional values of toughness and reason, combined with a certain "cowboy mentality," proceed to shoot at the leaders of the community until they surrender. Thus this episode of the *A-Team* could be interpreted as the protagonists defending a more traditional and archaic "American way of life" against strange and "weakening" influences from the East. In spite of their pronounced strength, however, the *A-Team* is also clearly identified as the "good guys." They help a

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<sup>76</sup> On Bhagwan's charismatic leadership see Susan J. Palmer's "Charisma and Abdication: A Study of the Leadership of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh."



father in need, a daughter in distress, and they stand up for each other when the evil cult members are hunting them. With power, cunning, humor and friendship the *A-Team* has won the sympathy of the American audience.

The sometimes larger-than-life masculine action heroes from 1980s film and television are often considered a cultural “backlash” to the advances of the feminist movement (cf. Jeffords or Faludi) in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus it is not very surprising that American television of the 1980s is almost devoid of female action heroes.<sup>77</sup> Even though a few women are protagonists in cop or detective shows, such as *Charlie's Angels* (1976-81) or *Cagney & Lacey* (1982-88), the emphases of these shows are either on the actresses' good looks or the dramatic storyline, but never on the action sequences as in some of the male-centered shows mentioned above. In detective shows that feature a man/woman team, such as *Moonlighting* (1985-89), and slightly more in *Remington Steele* (1982-87), both female protagonists Maddie Hayes (Cybill Shepherd) and Laura Holt (Stephanie Zimbalist) can be seen in action sequences alongside their male colleagues. But again, those action scenes are not at the center of the shows and the leading ladies hardly ever outdo the leading gentlemen.

### **Women and a Troubled Hero Figure**

So far, the 1980s were the last time that the traditional, violent Western action hero, albeit with a certain emotional investment, has dominated the screens so strongly and relatively unchallenged. Of course, the subsequent decades brought more (and sometimes the same old) male action heroes. If we have a look at the 1990s and beyond, we see television shows such as *Highlander* (1992-98), *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995-99), *Nash Bridges* (1996-2001), *Walker, Texas Ranger* (1993-2001) and others who represent the though, funny, and thoroughly masculine hero that fights for justice and power. Still, a change towards the inclusion of female action heroes as well as a more emotional and more troubled type of hero (whether male or female) is visible even in this type of shows. The Hercules of the 1990s (*Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, 1995-99) is very different from the Heracles of ancient Greece or Rome. Hercules is presented as a good-looking, friendly, nurturing and caring man, who, almost coincidentally, happens to be a half-god and tries to use those supernatural powers he has as a result to help people in need.

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<sup>77</sup> On the big screen, a few female action heroes emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Probably the most well-known representative of female action heroes from those years is Sigourney Weaver as Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* movies.

Traveling the country with his best friend Iolaus, Hercules is chased by his step-mother and nemesis Hera, who is out to destroy the hunky evidence of her husband's unfaithfulness. In all his adventures, full of fights and other physical action sequences, Hercules is nevertheless portrayed as very emotional, concerned for his wife, family and his friends. He is troubled by the evil in the world and questions his own status as a hero more than once.

Many movies and television shows starting in the 1990s show the male hero with a female partner.<sup>78</sup> Easily the most successful couple on 1990s television screens is Dana Scully and Fox Mulder in *The X-Files* (1993-2002). Even though the show is not necessarily an action-adventure show, it is nevertheless very interesting to observe the almost total equality in intelligence, skills, but also quirks and problems of both protagonists. Mulder and Scully each have their particular fields of expertise, both save each other's lives a number of times, and both can hold their own when it comes to physical fights, shootings or other trying situations. At the same time both heroes can act highly irrationally, have troubled private lives and turn to each other for advice, comfort and partnership. Another good example for a partnership where the male action hero actually appears far more troubled than his female counterpart is the rebirth of one of the most significant American superheroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* (1993-1997). The "Man of Steel," the invincible comic hero of the 1950s, is suddenly a very soft spoken and insecure "Superman": "he was sweet and insecure and always consulting his small-town parents about emotional turmoil ... The newer, younger Clark Kent seen in *Smallville* (2001-2011) also follows this pattern" (Gauntlett 61). As a matter of fact, the "secret identity" persona of Clark Kent, with his smaller and bigger problems, is almost more interesting to the audience, and to his love interest Lois Lane, than the heroic deeds of Superman himself.

Where in the 1980s audiences would have to be content with Cagney and Lacey engaging in a few well-meant car chases, television women of the 1990s are decidedly more physical and proactive. Female action heroes in series such as *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *La Femme Nikita* (1997-2001), *Alias* (2001-2006), or

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<sup>78</sup> In film we observe this type of pairing for example in the 1997 James Bond instalment *Tomorrow Never Dies*, where Hong Kong martial arts star Michelle Yeoh gives smooth Pierce Brosnan quite a run for his money. Another man/woman action team is found in the *Matrix* trilogy. Without the help of tough, leather-clad Trinity, Neo would never have succeeded in gaining control over the Matrix.

*Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001) with the first female captain in the *Star Trek* franchise, support the argument, that female action heroes are as successful as their male colleagues.

Summing up, we can say that making the hero a likable persona, dealing with their troubles and emotions is only the first step toward creating heroes that are accessible and interesting to audiences. In contemporary television shows it is not enough to give the viewers a hunky hero with lots of firepower and legions of enemies to overcome. Today's audience wants to "get into the head" of their heroes and get to know them on a very intimate level. Viewers are no longer satisfied to see Superman save the world from an evil scientist, they want to know how he feels about his own role as a superhero, how he arrives at any decisions and about his personal life when he is not saving the world. The journey and the hero's finding himself on this journey has become equally as important for the average viewer as the slaying of the monster itself.

### **The Construction of Male and Female Action Heroes**

One of the questions posed above was which influence gender has on the representation and construction of contemporary television action heroes. Both, male and female action heroes are often similarly constructed and are successful with the audience independent of their gender.<sup>79</sup> In terms of behavior, motivation, presentation and target groups, however, male and female action heroes may be decidedly different. To elaborate on this I would like to draw a short comparison of two action heroes from 1990s adventure television shows: Xena, from *Xena: Warrior Princess* and the vampire Angel from the shows *BtVS* and *Angel*. Since this is not the place for an in-depth evaluation, this excursion is only meant to illustrate certain tendencies in the set-up and categorization of hero figures which can be observed on American television.

Separated by approximately two millennia in terms of setting, Angel and Xena do not seem to have much in common. However, if we look at the individual traits that are used to create the image of a troubled action hero, we will find a number of similarities. Both characters are introduced as heroes with a dark past, struggling to find redemption in the

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<sup>79</sup> This has changed slightly over the last few decades. Female action heroes such as Wonder Woman (*Wonder Woman* 1975-1979) or the ladies from *Charlie's Angels* would incorporate certain elements of an archtypal hero (according to Campbell's criteria), which were not much different from traits of their male colleagues, for example, in *Spider Man* (1967-1970) or *The 6 Million Dollar Man* (1974-1978). However, as already mentioned above, female action heroes were rather restricted by the aesthetics and moral values of their time. The ideal of a feminine physique, the women's ability to fight, their heterosexuality, and especially a dependence on a strong male character, are very different compared to female action heroes on American television in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

eyes of the world and their own. On the screen they both appear clothed in dark colors – though Xena wears considerably fewer, scantier and more form-fitting outfits than Angel – both are often placed in a shadowy part of the screen, or shadows will darken their faces or their whole body.

The physical appearance of both action heroes is meant to appeal to a wide range of viewers, with their bodies often at the center of the camera's attention, especially in meticulously choreographed fighting sequences. Even the background stories of the two characters, which are the premise of the respective shows, have astonishing parallels.

In their youth, both heroes set out to find their place in society and fail tragically. As a result, they are disconnected from their families. There is, however, an important difference between Angel and Xena at this point. Xena tries to take responsibility and defend her family and community when they are threatened from the outside. After losing her younger – and favorite – brother, she gets so caught up in this cause that she eventually loses herself to it. Angel starts off as a spoilt, irresponsible young man, drinking, and whoring his way through life. When he is turned into a vampire, his first order of business is to kill his family, starting with his little sister, his mother, and finally, his father. After that, the vampire, who will be known as Angelus, murders every inhabitant of his home village. Accordingly, the heroes are staged slightly differently by the authored image. Xena is often shown from a low angle, riding, or fighting on her horse, whereas Angelus is usually filmed at eye-level or in canted frames. Thus, Xena is presented as a somewhat nobler character one can look up to, whereas Angelus is a human turned into a monster, his humanity as askew as the images.

During their phase of being evil, or at least violently self-absorbed, both hero figures receive nicknames from their contemporaries. Xena, the powerful warlord, is known for ten years as “The Destroyer of Nations.” A title which inspires fear, but also respect and even admiration. Angelus, wreaking havoc throughout Europe is given the moniker “The Demon with the Face of an Angel.” In contrast to Xena who is exactly what she appears to be, a ruthless, violent warrior, the evilness of Angelus is hidden away behind a handsome, even kind, face, tricking people into trusting him, only to kill them.<sup>80</sup> Again, we can see a

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<sup>80</sup> On a side-note, I find the depiction of Angelus as hiding his wickedness behind a façade of beauty very interesting, since it reverses traditional story-telling where evil women are often extraordinarily beautiful. Looking at different Western mythologies, we see women as beautiful temptresses and ruthless killers from the “original sinner” Eve to the “femme fatale” of Film Noir, and even modern Evil Queen(s) in Disney films. A man in the role of the handsome monster is not common in traditional Western narratives and might be another hint at changing concepts of gender performance in contemporary American television culture.

difference in how the hero figures are presented. Even though both characters are feared for their actions, the titles they are given by society reflect on their personalities: Xena, upfront and fairly predictable, wildly enjoying her strength and power; Angelus, deceptive, erratic, and delighting in the pain of his victims.

The turning point in both heroes' lives is introduced by outside characters. For Angelus the world changes when he is cursed by gypsies and regains his soul, which was lost during his time as vampire. Along with his soul come consciousness and the realization of his atrocities. Renaming himself Angel, the vampire goes into hiding, living off animals and criminals. Eventually, in the mid-1990s, a mysterious demon named Whistler approaches Angel and convinces him to help the newly initiated Slayer, Buffy Summers, in her fight to protect humanity. This task, and eventually his love for Buffy, gives new purpose to Angel's life and he tries to atone for the crimes of his past. Angel suffers for almost as long as he has brought suffering to others, but at the same time he does not possess the strength to actually change his life, and actively seek atonement, until he is recruited to protect the Slayer.

Xena's army mutinies when she refuses to kill an infant her men are holding for ransom. Having born and given away a son of her own years ago, Xena is now saved from evil through feelings of motherhood. This is a very gender oriented interpretation of the residual good still inside of Xena. However, being a mother, or having maternal emotions, is seen as a weakness by her soldiers. In an attempt to prove her strength and win back her army, Xena plans to kill the legendary Hercules. Hercules subsequently beats Xena, but does not kill her, apparently trusting that there is something good left in her character. Consequently, the demi-god tells the warrior princess that "killing isn't the only way of proving you're a warrior."<sup>81</sup> Hercules's belief in her ability to change her life is the push Xena needs to switch sides. In contrast to Angel, she does not retreat from the world to suffer and wallow in self-pity, but Xena goes out and saves some girls from being sold into slavery, thus discovering a new path for her life. Though Xena does need the help of her friend and companion Gabrielle to navigate "normal" society, she is presented as decidedly stronger and more determined on an emotional level than Angel.

To recapitulate: the background story of both hero characters are rather similar in that they both were "evil" for an extensive time period but then are "saved" by a helpful person. Both heroes decide to make amends for their past actions by fighting for peace and

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<sup>81</sup> *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, "The Warrior Princess" 1.09.

justice in their respective environments. However, whereas *Angel* starts out as an emotionally weak individual with numerous negative character traits, Xena is drawn as a noble, though nevertheless ruthless, warrior. A seemingly gender-specific weakness, motherhood, is turned into a personal strength by which Xena turns into a hero. Thus both heroes do have many similarities concerning their narrative, but clear differences can be seen in the emotional make-up of the characters.

Another, very poignant difference is that the “Xenaverse” is dominated by women. Not only the two main protagonists are female, but also a great number of characters that inhabit the series, whether recurring or not, and whether they are friend or foe. Even though most of the women in *XWP* know how to fight, Xena herself is not beyond using her physical appearance and sexuality as a weapon.<sup>82</sup>

*Angel*, as a spin-off from *BtVS*, is also influenced by strong women. Without Buffy, neither the series, nor the fictional character of Angel would exist. Still, the friends that accompany the vampire throughout the television show *Angel* are usually two men and one woman. Though there are also quite a number of powerful women on *Angel*, the “Angelverse” is slightly more male-centered than *XWP*. Consequently, the target audiences are quite different. Whereas *XWP* is designed primarily as a family show, the creators of *Angel* seek to capture the young adults demographic, along with fans of the science-fiction, fantasy and horror genre. Thus, the construction of a particular hero figure on television is also strongly influenced by the targeted audience and what the creators believe will be popular.

In general we have seen that in the mere construction of a contemporary action hero, gender does not necessarily have to play a part. However, when it comes to the representation of the hero’s character, the storylines, and even the target group in the audience, gender may be quite a significant factor. Over the past few decades we have seen action heroes on American television screens, whether troubled or content, whether female or male, adapt to the demands of the audience. A troubled life, a constant emotional and physical struggle of survival, often brings the main protagonists to their own physical and emotional limits. Here lies the emotional investment of the audience with the protagonists of popular television series.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> It should be mentioned that Angel, too, uses his appearance to deceive people about his being a vampire, and/or to gain information. In his evil past, Angelus frequently used sex to attract potential victims.

<sup>83</sup> In this we might also observe a change in the American action genre as such. Of course, action is still the most important element, but the focus on character development gains increasing significance. Furthermore, the

To sum up, the hero needs to be physically strong and attractive. To emphasize the duality of his/her character, dark colors and shadows dominate the visualization of the hero. The storyline usually involves a traumatic incident in childhood or at a relatively young age; a descent into darkness, i.e., extreme anti-social behavior; a turning point, usually accompanied by a kind of “savior”-figure; the hero’s decision to make amends for his/her evil deeds in the past; and eventually, the denial of redemption and/or happy-end. Whether the tragic action hero of contemporary American television is male or female does not matter much in the initial set up of the character. The story may change, the type, or even archetype, however, is very much the same. It is important to keep in mind that the biological sex or gender of a modern television action hero is relatively unimportant. Indeed, as Judith Butler has suggested, gender is constructed through performance and, especially on television, through individual perception by the audience (cf. *Gender Trouble* 140 ff.).

Whether or not modern hero figures such as Xena, Buffy and Sara Pezzini are still constructed with elements of the archetypal hero, as described by Campbell, or if we are faced with an updated version of the hero in contemporary television shows will be investigated in the following chapter.

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character of the hero becomes more rounded and displays emotional awareness and development. He or she is hardly ever an isolated figure, but most often part of an essential team.

### **3.2 Xena, Buffy and Sara Pezzini as Archetypal Heroes**

When creators of modern television series use mythology and archetypal images from ancient texts to weave particular American ideas into their narratives, we need to ask ourselves if the heroes of these shows are constructed according to these same mythological and archetypal foundations. Are the main protagonists archetypal heroes, i.e., created on the basis of universally understandable patterns which make them easily accessible for the audiences regarding identification? Or do we observe the emergence of a different type of hero figure, because she is female?

#### **Campbell's Archetypal Hero**

Joseph Campbell, in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, develops a rather detailed analysis of the different stages which any given mythological or archetypal hero might have to traverse. Campbell examines a multitude of heroic tales from all over the world and breaks down the legends into basic patterns. These patterns Campbell refers to as a "monomyth," which, according to him, can be applied to any mythological narrative. Even though Campbell's idea of one unchangeable structure, that every mythological story is based on, has been criticized for unnecessarily supporting clichés and being outdated, I believe that the importance he placed on the archetypal hero figure is still very much reflected in contemporary cultural discourse.<sup>84</sup>

Campbell describes how every hero basically passes through three distinct stages on his way to becoming an archetypal, mythological hero: departure, initiation and return. In the departure phase the hero, whether reluctant or keen, is called to adventure. Often he is given supernatural aid, either in the form of a helper, a protective figure or a magical charm or amulet to guide and guard the hero. Of course, there are any number of trials scattered along the hero's way to fulfill his quest during the initiation phase. One of these trials is what Campbell calls "The Meeting with the Goddess" (109 ff.). Here, the hero marries a queen-like or mother-like figure (usually an older woman) which represents his mastery of knowledge and of life. Female figures can also act as a temptress, so that the hero must decide between truth and lie. In his gaining of knowledge and possibly a further prize at the end of the hero's quest, lies the boon that the hero must bring to his people. However, before the hero can head back home again in the return phase, he must be

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<sup>84</sup> American popular culture is full of examples of heroic figures from Superman to the "heroes" of the television show by that same name (*Heroes* 2006-2010).



“reborn,” i.e., there is often a final test to see if the hero has learned his lesson and has gained a widened consciousness which will be beneficial to society. Eventually, the hero will return to his own community and, with the boon, support growth and prosperity. Thus we can say that in Campbell's analysis the hero has one primary purpose, which is to provide his community with the solution to a crucial social or cultural problem. However, this is only one aspect of a whole range of functions a hero might have for a particular society.

For my examination of the question whether or not the characters of Buffy, Xena and Sara Pezzini are constructed as archetypal heroes, I will concentrate on the three key stages in Campbell's structure: departure, initiation and return. At first, I will provide a quick overview of the respective shows, their main protagonists with individual attributes, and storylines, after which I will seek to determine whether the heroes of *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB* are archetypal heroes in Campbell's sense. Focusing on the events and the staging of the narrative of the series, and interpreting them according to the categories Campbell developed, I aim to show that the three women, though primarily following the established patterns of archetypal heroes, expand the criteria of Campbell's categories by adding distinctly “female” elements to the archetype.

### **3.2.1 A Short Introduction of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Witchblade***

In order to evaluate whether or not Xena, Buffy and Sara Pezzini are characters which have been created in the shape of archetypal heroes, it is necessary to shortly introduce each of the protagonists and the fictional universe in which they exist.

#### **Xena, the Warrior Princess**

Set in a fantastic-historical version of Ancient Greece, the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* tells the story of Xena of Amphipolis, a reformed warlord, seeking to atone for atrocities she committed in her past. Helping her is Gabrielle, a young woman whom Xena saved from slavers. Initially depicted as a naïve country girl, the aspiring bard Gabrielle becomes a strong warrior over the course of the series and the most important emotional and spiritual anchor for Xena whenever the reformed warlord uses her vast array of skills to fight for “the greater good.”

The character of Xena first appears in the series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, where Xena is introduced in the episode “The Warrior Princess” (1.09) as a fierce warlord, head of her own army and set on killing Hercules. Xena comes back to the show in “The Gauntlet” (1.12), which heralds the awakening of the “good” Xena. Betrayed by her first in command, who convinces his fellow soldiers that Xena has gone soft for trying to save an infant instead of using the child for ransom, Xena has to endure a violent gauntlet, after which she is cast out of the community of her men. Challenging Hercules to prove that she is far from weak, she loses the duel. However, Hercules does not kill her, but instead opens her eyes and her mind to the possibility of a different way of life: to fight in order to help the weak and powerless.

Throughout her journey, Xena meets a number of famous historical figures, from Julius Caesar to Boudica, from Cleopatra to Lao Tse. Though history and mythology are but a vast playground for the creators of *XWP*, the messages that are inserted into the legends of old, such as democracy, justice, etc. are always very contemporary and very American, as we will see in the further examination of the series.

In facing the challenges of protecting the weak and fighting for the greater good, Xena has a number of helpers. The most important one, as already mentioned, is her companion and “soul mate”<sup>85</sup> Gabrielle, whose role in context to the hero figure I will discuss below in more detail. Xena’s horse Argo, trained by his mistress to perform almost impossible tricks is another invaluable friend to the hero. For archetypal heroes “the horse who gets the hero to his [her] quest has naturally a central place” (Frye, *Anatomy* 196). Argo is not only important as a helping character; the horse is also one of Xena’s attributes, which make her instantly recognizable. Another identifying mark is Xena’s unique weapon: the Chakram. This circular shaped throwing weapon has its origins in India, but it is never explained when and where Xena obtains it, nor, how she became so adept at using the weapon.

Another recurring character is the would-be-warrior Joxer. Often coming across as a somewhat annoying comic relief character, Joxer’s friendship and loyalty for Xena and Gabrielle makes him an appreciated side-kick from time to time.

The overall message of the series concurs with the show being tagged as a “family show.” The primary aim of the protagonists of the series is to help the weak and the poor and to fight for the vague, but constantly present notion of the “greater good.”

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<sup>85</sup> See, for example, the episode “Fallen Angel” (5.01).

**Buffy Summers, the Vampire Slayer**

The show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* centers on a young woman, Buffy Anne Summers, a 16-year-old teenager with a secret. Buffy Summers is a superhero: “In every generation there is a Chosen One. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer” (Opening Credits *BtVS*, Season One). This sacred destiny, about which Buffy feels rather ambiguous, is revealed in the seventh season of the show to have originated in ancient Africa. Centuries ago three magicians, the so-called “Shadow Men,” created a line of Slayers by inculcating a girl they held captive with the essence of a demon to fight demonic forces (cf. “Get It Done” 7.21). The descendants of these “Shadow Men” are today represented by the “Watcher’s Council” with their headquarters in London. These watchers locate potential Slayers, to advise and train them, and to be informed about them. However, the watchers are far from being an altruistic society. They have their own agenda and try to manipulate and control all aspects of the life of a Slayer.

Set in a fictional Southern Californian town with the cheerful name Sunnydale, Buffy is guided by her personal watcher Rupert Giles, who poses as a high school librarian to educate, train, and prepare Buffy for her fights. Already during the first few seasons he becomes more of a fatherly mentor to Buffy than an objective watcher. For being too close to Buffy and for having “a father’s love for the child (cf. “Helpless” 3.12) Giles eventually is dismissed from his position as watcher to Buffy, but in violation of the orders of the Council he stays in Sunnydale to continue helping and training Buffy. And Buffy can use all the help she can get as the town of Sunnydale is situated above a so-called “hell mouth,” an entrance to the underworld, which vampires and demons feel drawn to. Together with the presence of the Slayer, the hell-mouth makes for the quantity of evil forces congregating in and around Sunnydale being higher than anywhere else in the world.

Traditionally a Slayer, who is outfitted with supernatural strength, stamina and agility, is expected to concentrate only on training and fighting the evil forces of the world. In consequence, a Slayer tends to lead a thoroughly isolated life. Buffy, however, breaks with this tradition as she is adamant to pursue her high school diploma, as well as romantic relationships as any average girl would. Together with her two best friends from high school, Willow Rosenberg and Xander Harris, as well as “Giles,” as Buffy’s watcher is usually referred to, Buffy goes about her task to battle vampires and demons at night and the everyday hell that is the life of a teenager by day. Buffy’s friends provide her with the

emotional, but also intellectual support she needs in order to kill demons without being killed herself.

Similar to *XWP*, friends acting as a substitute for family and as helpers to the hero's cause are crucial in *BtVS*. Buffy's friend Willow is introduced as a math and computer whiz, a nerd, and an outsider at school. With her brilliant intellect and Buffy's friendship, Willow examines the world of magic that she is drawn into and evolves into one of the most powerful witches on the planet. Willow is "the brain" of the so-called "Scooby Gang"<sup>86</sup> who is invaluable for research and, especially in the later seasons, for supporting Buffy's battles with the help of magic. Willow's best friend since kindergarden is Xander Harris. Xander is brought into the narrative as a clownish, geeky character, who, like Willow, is an outsider at school. Originally infatuated with Buffy, Xander becomes a loyal friend and functions as the source of emotional strength and unfaltering friendship to both Buffy and Willow. These relationships provide a basis for the Scoobies to operate on and for keeping them together as a team, since the fighting of demons and evil in general often leaves little room for reflection upon regular social concerns.

### **Sara Pezzini, wielder of the Witchblade**

The short-lived television series *Witchblade*,<sup>87</sup> which successfully combines the genres of cop show, fantasy and science-fiction, based on the graphic novels by Top Cow Productions, focuses on New York City homicide detective Sara Pezzini. Introducing the detective in the first scenes of the pilot film as wearing men's underwear and riding a heavy motorcycle, along with the accompaniment of catchy rock music (cf. Pilot Episode), supports the idea of Sara as a tough, no-nonsense person, and at the same time emphasizes her physical attractiveness. Especially the motorcycle conjures up the image of the street-wise city cowboy; a rugged individual, determined to deal out justice on her own terms.

When the detective comes into the possession of the Witchblade, an ancient, magical artifact, her life changes distinctly. The powerful weapon seems to have consciously chosen Sara as its latest wielder and affords her with the ability to see visions of different times and places, as well as the talent to see and converse with the dead. Providing Sara

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<sup>86</sup> Buffy and her friends call themselves the "Scooby Gang" or "Scoobies" in reference to the cartoon heroes from *Scooby Doo*. In *Scoobie Doo* (1969-1973) four teenagers and a dog fight ghosts, monsters and other supernatural phenomena.

<sup>87</sup> Although the television series only uses a fraction of the background provided by the graphic novels, I am exclusively going to focus on the characters and the Witchblade artefact as they are created and presented in the series, since the basis of my examinations are the functions of mythological and archetypal images in television only.

not only with supernatural abilities, but also with a physical armor, it saves the detective's life more than once. Even though it is not instantaneously clear why the Witchblade has chosen Sara, it sends the detective on a quest to find out.<sup>88</sup>

The Witchblade is a very complex artifact, as it is not simply an antique item imbued with certain powers, but it seems to be a sentient entity with a creative intelligence and a hidden agenda. It changes its form according to the needs of its wielder. When the blade is passive and resting, it usually appears as a slim silver bracelet adorned with an oval shaped red stone. In times of danger (for the wielder) the bracelet transforms into a gauntlet, which has the power to deflect bullets. This gauntlet either remains a metal sheath covering Sara's right hand, or extends a sword blade. At times, the Witchblade casts its wielder into full body armor reminiscent of medieval knights. Still, the armor emphasizes the femininity of its wearer by highlighting the womanly shape of the body within.

Regarding the question of gender performance in *WB*, David Greven has claimed that modern female action heroes not only transcend gender norms, but are constructed as a different type of human altogether. He believes that "the TV action heroine is increasingly removed from the category of merely human" (124), calling them "metahuman"<sup>89</sup> in order to "aptly and collectively describe the new race of women warriors" (125). Even though I do agree with Greven when he says that the tough woman in contemporary American television series "serves as a helpful example of the fluidity of sexual and gendered roles," I do not think that they are a new species within a fictional universe. Placing these "metahumans" outside of society is simply impossible if they live in, interact with and impact a society which is obviously part of contemporary American culture.

Aside from the powers the blade gives to its wielder, it is revealed very early in the narrative that the Witchblade consists of a type of metal which is unknown to scientists (cf. Pilot Episode) thus rendering it even more mysterious. The Witchblade can only be wielded by a woman. Whenever a man tries to use it, he is hurt or crippled; sometimes a hand or an arm is cut off. Nevertheless, there have been men who have tried on the Witchblade and survived relatively unscathed, for example Kenneth Irons. The artifact

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<sup>88</sup> Unlike most other television series, the two seasons of the show present two distinct narratives. At the end of the first season, Sara Pezzini, through the powers of the Witchblade, is able to turn back time to the exact same point where the narrative began in the pilot episode of the series. From that point onwards events unfold in a different line during the second season. As the first season focuses more intensely on the mythological imagery of the Witchblade, I will keep my examinations to the first season of *WB*, with only a few points from the second part of the show to be touched upon.

<sup>89</sup> The term "metahuman" Greven has adapted from the television series *Birds of Prey* (2002). In the show the term was used by one of the protagonists, Oracle, to describe the "more-than-human genetic traits" of the character Huntress (cf. Greven 124).

rejected him, and left a scar on his hand. Through this experience Irons has a spiritual connection to the Witchblade and uses this in his attempts to manipulate Sara.

The setting of *WB* is New York City. However, it is not depicted as the NYC of the Wall Street brokers, nor that of an artistic crowd, and not even solely as the background for a gritty cop show, but from the very beginning of the series, recurring images portray New York as a city of mystery. Within the first few minutes of the pilot episode, the audience is confronted with figures of gargoyles glaring down from tall buildings, statues of angels and murals showing mythological and fantastic creatures. This imagery sets the tone and the atmosphere for the show. Throughout the series similar references reappear frequently, serving as evidence of a world beyond that which we can perceive with our human senses. Whereas mythology is part of the premise of shows such as *XWP* or *BtVS*, *WB* seems to start out “normal,” but then slowly introduces the viewer to a world full of supernatural occurrences, many of them strongly related to Christian mythology (cf. “Legion” 1.05). However, as mentioned above, the series also draws from other cultures and legends when it is revealed that previous wielders of the Witchblade have been prominent figures like Cleopatra, or the Celtic warrior Boudica. Consequently, *WB* presents a valuable addition to my examination of functions of mythology in American television.

In contrast to *Buffy* or *Xena*, Sara Pezzini does not seem to have a group of close friends who share her life. Greven claims that “her tough womanliness ensures her isolation, her remove from social ties of any kind” (146). But even though Sara is admittedly constructed much more like the typical Western lone hero than the other two female action heroes examined in this work, she does have important relationships and is not isolated from society.

Indeed, one of the most essential people in Sara’s life is undoubtedly her colleague Danny Woo. The partners respect and appreciate each other and there is a genuine friendship between the two cops. When Danny is shot during the pilot episode<sup>90</sup> he returns to Sara as a spirit guide, helping her to gain a better understanding of the Witchblade. Another young man who is devoted to Sara is entrepreneur Gabriel Bowman. Gabriel earns money by procuring and selling rare artifacts. Thus it is little wonder that when he meets Sara, he is fascinated by the bracelet she wears on her wrist and begins to help Sara

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<sup>90</sup> Due to the complex nature of the show, Danny Woo is only killed and acts as a spiritual aide to Pezzini in the first season of the show. When Pezzini turns back time at the end of the first season, Danny remains a living, breathing partner to Pezzini throughout the second season.

gathering information on the Witchblade. The obscure billionaire and president of the multinational conglomerate Vorschlag Industries, Kenneth Irons has been obsessed with the Witchblade for several decades. He is one of the few men, in the series' history, who tried on the Witchblade, only to have the blade reject him, branding him with its sign: two interlocking circles, on the back of his right hand, closely resembling the sign for eternity. Though Irons seems to be helping Sara by providing her with some information on the Witchblade, his purpose is much darker and he keeps most of his knowledge to himself. Irons wishes to control Sara and thus control the power of the Witchblade. Working for Irons as personal assistant, bodyguard, messenger and occasional hit man, is a mysterious man by the name of Ian Nottingham.<sup>91</sup> Nottingham has a relationship with Irons which goes beyond that of a simple assistant and is more that of a father (Irons) and son (Nottingham), albeit a son to be used and manipulated. Even though Nottingham cannot break free from the hold Irons has on him, he develops a deep reverence, even love, for Sara and assists her against the orders of his master.<sup>92</sup>

### 3.2.2 Xena, Buffy and Sara Pezzini as Archetypal Heroes

Now that we have gained an insight into how the heroes and their worlds have been constructed, I would like to examine, how much their creation resembles those patterns that were observed by Joseph Campbell as distinctive elements for the archetypal hero. I will also consider if the archetypal hero's journey changes when the hero in question is female.

#### Xena

The journey of an archetypal hero, according to Campbell and his *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, begins with the Call to Adventure. For Xena, this call is initiated by Hercules in the *Legendary Journeys* series, who shows her that living a life of helping mankind will eventually be more satisfying than killing people and destroying the lives of others. Mary Magoulick has argued that Hercules "makes" Xena, and that "this powerful male progenitor, who often doubles as lover, retains some power and control over the woman"

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<sup>91</sup> Towards the end of the first season it is revealed that Nottingham is a genetically engineered man. One of the components in creating him was the blood of Elizabeth Brontë, Sara's grandmother, thus making him a blood-relative of the current wielder.

<sup>92</sup> Again, this is only true for the first season. In the second season Nottingham becomes the strongest adversary and antagonist to Pezzini.

(735). I disagree with this statement, as the ultimate decision on whether or not to change her life, and in which way, is made by Xena herself after she has left Hercules behind. Though, of course, she has been influenced by Hercules and he pointed her into a particular direction, the agency remains with Xena herself and she alone makes the choice as to how her life will continue.

The optimistic idea of changing your life and starting over again is well documented in American culture (cf. Uslander). Even if it seems that you have failed in life, you can make a change for the better if you are courageous enough to make the right decision. In American ideology the idea of turning around one's life goes hand in hand with optimism and mobility. Self-help programs such as the 12-step program of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) have become part of everyday life. As a matter of fact, if we were to compare Xena's path to redemption with the 12-step program, we could observe some astonishing parallels. If alcoholics try to battle the demon alcohol, then former warlord Xena battles her lust for power and violence.

The first step to a new life as described in the 12-steps is that a person admits that they are powerless over alcohol and that their lives have become unmanageable (cf. AA 59). As we have said, Xena's problem is her desire for power, but there comes a point where she realizes that she is not in control of her life anymore. With the help of Hercules or, in the language of the 12-steps "a power greater than our own," Xena is able to clear her mind and to follow on to step three, i.e., to make a conscious decision to turn her life around. Compared to the often very religious choice of words of the AA, Xena's steps are more secular, as she has very ambivalent, primarily negative, relationships to the gods.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, the refusal of divine help is at once a sign for Xena's own mental and spiritual discipline, but could on the other hand confirm increasing secular tendencies in the audience who are supposed to identify with the show's hero.

The gauntlet Xena must endure at the hands of her own army corresponds to Campbell's idea of passing through "the belly of the whale" (Campbell, *Hero* 77). This is the idea of crossing a threshold, which teaches the hero to "die," i.e., to separate his ego from the rest of himself in order to be free to fight the monsters threatening the social order. The passing of the threshold is a death-rebirth scenario which prepares the hero for the new world waiting for him. Suffering through the trial brought on by her past life, Xena is changed forever from the "Destroyer of Nations" to "Warrior Princess." After this gauntlet, we can

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<sup>93</sup> As the series is set in Ancient Greece, the Greek gods, especially Ares and, interestingly, Aphrodite, play important parts in many episodes.



suggest that Xena takes the fourth step of her own personal abstinence program, where she makes “a searching and fearless moral inventory” (AA 59) of herself, when she leaves her army, buries her armor and weapons (cf. “Sins of the Past” 1.01) and is prepared to start her life over again.

Starting out on her journey, Xena meets, or better rescues, the young bard Gabrielle, who becomes the most important person in the former warlord's life. Campbell describes that setting out on his journey the hero is often given supernatural aid (cf. *Hero* 69-72). The hero encounters a protective figure, in Western folk-lore often embodied by the helpful crone or the fairy god-mother. This figure is said to represent “the benign, protecting power of destiny” (ibid. 71). Young Gabrielle seems far from being a protective power to Xena. But, though she does not have supernatural powers, she functions as a guide for Xena, back to the “normal” world, a re-socialization of sorts to turn a feared warlord into a popular folk hero. Furthermore, when Xena is under attack from those seeking revenge or justice for the atrocities she committed during her warlord years, Gabrielle takes on the role of defender, and consequently protector of Xena (cf. “Sins of the Past” 1.01, “The Reckoning” 1.06).<sup>94</sup> Thus we can argue that Gabrielle may indeed be a “personification of his [the hero's] destiny to guide and aid him” (Campbell, *Hero* 77). That Xena has to rely on Gabrielle to achieve emotional balance and even talks about the crucial role Gabrielle plays in the former warlord's life frequently differs from Campbell's description of an autonomous heroic figure. At this point, I would argue, we can see one of the main differences in the depiction of male and female heroes in contemporary culture. Whereas the stereotypical male action hero is often shown as a “lone wolf,” making decisions to counter problems on his own, female action heroes frequently rely on friends or family to arrive at a solution in an almost democratic way, after talking about and reflecting on the situation with a trusted person. Even though Xena is relatively self-reliant and used to commanding others, she regularly listens to Gabrielle's advice and apologizes openly, if, not having listened to her friend, something goes wrong. In the episode “Is There a Doctor in the House” (1.24) for example, Xena and Gabrielle are on route to Athens. Though Gabrielle suggests they should take a different route, Xena insists on the most direct course, even though there is a civil war going on in that particular area. Sure

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<sup>94</sup> In “The Reckoning” (1.06) the strong influence of American values on the television series is more than obvious. Xena is arrested and put on trial in front of a jury by some villagers. Gabrielle acts as her defense lawyer. This situation mimics a typical American legal process and reinforces the message of the positive values of the system.

enough, Xena and Gabrielle get entangled in this civil war and Gabrielle ends up seriously injured as a consequence. Tending to her wounded friend, Xena proclaims: "Gabrielle. You know, if I could do it all over again, I'd take the southern route. I'm so sorry." Sharon Ross has argued that "while traditional heroes of the past have been made tough via their individualism and their ability to confront obstacles by themselves, these women grow as heroes because of their female friends" (231). Gabrielle is necessary for Xena to do the heroic things she does, but at the same time Xena leaves Gabrielle enough freedom to become a hero in her own right (cf. Ross 221 ff.). Thus we can observe a distinct change from the traditional concept of the archetypal hero.

Coming back to the comparison of Xena's path of atonement to the AA's 12-step program, we can find similarities to the fifth step where one is to admit to themselves and another person "the exact nature of our wrongs" (AA 59). Even though Xena does not explain every single detail of her past life to Gabrielle when they meet, she is very upfront about who she is, who she was, that some of her demons are still with her and that she struggles against them constantly. Throughout the series Xena continues to "take personal inventory," and when she is wrong to "promptly admit it" (ibid.). This corresponds exactly with step ten of the program and is another basic concept of *XWP*.<sup>95</sup>

The premise of an action adventure show like *XWP* is, of course, that the hero is constantly challenged by evil monsters, gods, and unknown situations that need to be overcome. And as soon as Xena has made the decision to start her quest for atonement, and teams up with Gabrielle, Xena's adventures begin. Using Campbell's terms, this is the initiation stage, which follows the phase of departure. Here, the hero has to endure many trials which will eventually make him a wiser person who can better contribute to society. By overcoming challenges, the hero's awareness of the world around him is expanded. Naturally, in the process of turning from an evil warlord into a champion for the defenseless, Xena needs to open up to experiences she would never have made otherwise. In the very first episode, when Xena returns to her home village of Amphipolis to meet her estranged mother, but also to warn the villagers of the warlord Draco heading their way, the villagers, including Xena's mother, are initially less than happy to see the Warrior Princess. They perceive Xena as just another evil warrior bent on destruction and Xena's

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<sup>95</sup> The "taking of personal inventory" is also might be traced back to the Puritan practice of self-examination (cf. Hambrick-Stowe, Swaim, or Bercovitch). Of course, whereas the New England Puritans employed self-examination ultimately to become more pleasing to God, Xena attempts to find a way to become acceptable in her society, without losing her unique personality.

mother Cyrene very harshly states: “Go away, Xena. This is not your town anymore. We are not your people. I am not your mother!” (“Sins of the Past” 1.01). As Xena challenges the warlord Draco to a fight for the village and its people, the villagers start appreciating the reformed Xena. They cheer her on during the battle and even try to help her. After Xena has won the fight, she once again faces her mother and begs her forgiveness for her past misdeeds. Cyrene hugs Xena fiercely and says: “I forgive you, my little one. I forgive you. I’m so happy to have you back again” (ibid.). Coincidentally, on Xena’s 12-step program, she is now actively engaged in “[making] a list of all persons we had harmed, and willing to make amends to them” (AA 59). The reaction of Xena’s mother also supports the idea that if one actively tries to make amends, the response will ultimately be a positive one.

As already mentioned, Xena has an ambivalent relationship with the gods. One reason for that might be that she has personally met a fair number of them. Constructed in the image of ancient Greece, the gods in the “Xenaverse” are modeled on the Greek concept of deities, i.e., they look like regular people, behave like regular people and the only thing which distinguishes them from an ordinary human are their divine powers. The god most closely connected to Xena is Ares, the God of War. Ares has elevated Xena to the position of his “Chosen” when she wreaked havoc as a warlord before she reformed. Their relationship during that time was based on a mutual attraction to power and to each other. During the show it becomes clear that Ares actually has, slightly twisted but nevertheless very deep and honest, romantic feelings for Xena, though the way he expresses those feelings may at times be rather unconventional. Throughout the series Ares tries to win back Xena as his chosen warrior – and as his lover – again and again. Though Xena’s choice is depicted as a hard struggle at times, since there is still a certain attraction left, she denies Ares any further power over her and her life. In Campbell’s analysis of the hero’s journey we could identify Ares as a male version of what Campbell has called the “Temptress” (*Hero* 120 ff.). This temptress is generally encountered during the hero’s initiation period and the “marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero’s total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master” (ibid.). Xena rejects her attraction to Ares, both in terms of power and in terms of sexuality. She becomes her own master, determining her own life and thus overcomes the classical image of the archetypal hero in consolidating all knowledge of the world and the abilities to deal with it within her. Thus, Xena chooses to continue her thorny road in becoming a better

person with the help of Gabrielle, a very normal human girl without any superpowers, instead of falling into Ares's traps and the ease of her former life.

All the dangers and adventures Xena faces culminate when Xena and her friend Gabrielle are caught by Xena's arch-enemy Julius Caesar. Caesar crucifies the two friends and they die. However, this is not the end of the story. Xena and Gabrielle simply move on into a spiritual world. They enter the realms of heaven and hell, becoming demons and archangels in the ongoing struggle between good and evil. Before the two heroes can lose themselves in this struggle, they are resurrected by the messiah-like figure of Eli and the angel Callisto. Following Campbell, Xena (together with Gabrielle) has reached yet another step in the initiation phase: the hero's "Apotheosis." This means a further expansion of consciousness and an elevation onto a spiritual, even godlike plane (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 149 ff.).<sup>96</sup> Xena and Gabrielle's passage into the spiritual arena of heaven and hell, their experiencing both being a demon and archangel at different times, cannot but lead to a deeper understanding of the world and themselves. Having thus experienced various levels of awareness, the heroes return to human society to continue fighting for the weak and the helpless. With this "spiritual awakening," as a result of successfully completing most of the steps in the 12-step program, Xena can now "carry this message" (AA 60) on to others.

Xena continues to fight for the greater good and to bring "The Ultimate Boon" (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 172 ff.) to her community after her most recent otherworldly experience, returning to her life of helping the powerless and sharing her wisdom with others. Nevertheless, Xena does not receive a much desired "Freedom to Live" (ibid. 238) at the end of her own personal journey. The creators of *XWP* have decided on a different ending for their hero. Instead of settling down and living happily ever after, the Warrior Princess finds closure in sacrificing her own life for the souls of 40,000 people (cf. "Friend in Need

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<sup>96</sup> It is also interesting to note that at this point in the series' narrative, the ancient gods of the Greek Pantheon have mostly lost their status and a new era is heralded by the arrival of binary concepts of good and evil based on Christian mythology. *XWP* consciously refrains from using Christian terminology such as "God" and "Devil", but still use the terms "angels" and "demon," even introducing the archangel Michael into the story. Writer R.J. Stewart explains that the idea of heaven and hell, angels and demons have become so secular that it is possible to use them out of a decidedly Christian context (cf. Interview with R.J. Stewart, Bonus Features, DVD *XWP* Season Five, Disc One). Personally, I do not feel that this alleged transition of Christian terms into a secularized context is convincing. If a narrative uses terms, imagery and messages commonly connected to a particular religious context, they cannot claim a conscious distancing from those discourses.

Part II” 6.22).<sup>97</sup> This event may still be interpreted as the “Departure of the Hero,” as Campbell describes it: “The last act in the biography of the hero is that of the death or departure. Here the whole sense of his life is epitomized. Needless to say, the hero would be no hero if death held for him any terror; the first condition is reconciliation with the grave” (*Hero* 356). Even though this conclusion to the show was not very popular with fans, looking at the premise of the greater narrative, it rather makes sense. Xena, on a quest for atonement, finds the ultimate fulfillment and closure in one last selfless act.

From what we have seen above I think there can be no doubt that Xena, the Warrior Princess of fictional Western antiquity is an archetypal hero in Campbell’s sense. Xena perceptibly passes through the stages of departure, initiation and return, and touches on several elements of the individual events as detailed by Campbell. She exhibits character traits and attributes which are inextricable parts of an archetypal hero. However, at the same time, Xena expands the concept of the archetypal hero in that she does not journey alone, but has a companion who complements her character and completes her as a human being. Xena is capable of emotional growth and admits to mistakes and errors in judgment, showing her as a vulnerable person. Usually, the archetypal hero has not had a dark past and started out his journey from the position of an anti-hero, or antagonist. This particular point of Xena’s narrative is also different from Campbell’s patterns. The advantage of constructing Xena in the mold of an archetypal hero is that most of the audience will be able to identify with the hero and recognize familiar patterns in the development of the character and the storylines. This is again important for the identification with the protagonist when the hero is used to negotiate social and cultural challenges in contemporary society. Giving the hero distinctly feminine traits, such as close companionship with friends and family and an overall emphasis on the importance of women in society refreshes and expands Campbell’s idea of the hero and makes the hero figure more adaptable in a changing social environment.

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<sup>97</sup> In this storyline we can also recognize parallels to the Christian account of Jesus who sacrifices his life to save all of humanity. Even though Xena “only” saves 40,000 souls, the act of redemption with an ultimate sacrifice is extremely similar.

### Buffy Anne Summers

Even before the narrative of the show starts, Buffy has met her first vampires. Drawing on the plot of a 1992 feature film by the same name,<sup>98</sup> the first episode of *BtVS* refers to events which happened before Buffy came to Sunnydale. During the first few episodes of the series the audience learns about the fact that while still in L.A., Buffy, a popular high school girl and cheer-leader, had been approached by the watcher Merrick. He explained to her that she had been chosen to be the Slayer and what this destiny entailed. Subsequently, Buffy had to face and overcome the dangerous vampire Lothos and his minions, which she did by burning down the high school gym, where the vampires had gathered. This storyline is taken up in the series, and is directly referred to when Buffy enters her new high school and the principal confronts her with her past: “You burned down the gym” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” 1.01). By coming to Sunnydale Buffy’s mother<sup>99</sup> had hoped to start their lives over again with a clean slate. However, this new life becomes difficult, when a high school student is found dead in the locker room of the gym with telling bite marks on his neck. Once again a watcher, Rupert Giles, finds the Slayer and intends to work with Buffy on her quest to fight evil. In both the film and the television version, the contacting of the Slayer by her respective watchers can be interpreted as Buffy’s “Call to Adventure,” the first step in the departure phase of the archetypal hero, using Campbell’s terminology. The “herald” summons Buffy into “an unsuspected world and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood” (Campbell, *Hero* 51). Introducing Buffy to the world of demons and vampires resembles a spiritual passage which uproots the hero from her known environment to “a zone unknown” (ibid.). Buffy refuses this call to adventure adamantly. Having gotten a first insight of what it means to be a Slayer, Buffy stoutly refuses her part in the adventure, arguing with Mr. Giles:

Buffy:	Cool! But, okay, ( <i>hands back the books on vampires Giles had assembled</i> ) first of all, I’m a Vampire Slayer. And secondly, I’m retired. Hey, I know! Why don’t you kill ‘em?
Giles:	A ...a Slayer slays, a Watcher...
Buffy:	...watches?
Giles:	Yes. No! ( <i>sets down the books</i> ) He, he trains her ... he ... he... he prepares her...
Buffy:	Prepares me for what? For getting kicked out of school? For

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<sup>98</sup> This film was the very first incarnation of Buffy, as created by Joss Whedon. However, as the producers made a number of significant changes to the initial script, the film altered the vision of Whedon severely. The film was not successful, neither with the box office nor the audience.

<sup>99</sup> Buffy’s parents are divorced and her father is mostly absent from the narrative.

losing all of my friends? For having to spend all of my time fighting for my life and never getting to tell anyone because I might endanger them? Go ahead! Prepare me. ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" 1.01)

As Campbell has asserted, the refusal to the call is not untypical for the archetypal hero (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 59 ff.). By refusing to follow the herald's lead, the hero holds on to the idea that "one's present system of ideals, virtues, goals, and advantages were to be fixed and made secure" (ibid.). However, as one of the premises of the show is that Buffy "represents the discerning and ethical citizen's ability to take a stand against evil wherever it is found" (Early 23), Buffy takes on the forces threatening her high school and her community. Nevertheless, throughout the series Buffy's struggle to combine her mythical destiny with being an ordinary woman is a constant point of tension.

In performing her tasks as the Slayer, Buffy is never alone. Aside from her friends Willow and Xander, she has strong aids in her watcher, and father-like friend Giles, and the vampire Angel. Being able to fall back not only on Giles's immense knowledge of the demon realms and the multitude of ancient books he keeps hidden in the Sunnydale High library, but also the collected information of the Watchers' Council is crucial for any successful approach to fighting the different varieties of demons. Buffy's other aide, the vampire Angel, is different from all the vampires the Slayer usually fights since he has a soul. Angel's soul was restored when a tribe of Gypsies cursed him to be able to feel the fear and pain of all his victims.<sup>100</sup> Quickly evolving from an occasional assistant, Angel soon becomes Buffy's boyfriend and lover. His sheer physical strength as well as his inside knowledge of the demon world makes Angel an invaluable helper to Buffy's cause. Campbell says that when the hero has acknowledged his call, he will be granted supernatural aid to help the hero on his way (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 69). Both Giles and Angel can be seen as such protective figures, guiding Buffy, helping Buffy, but most of all, trying to shield her from the evil forces of this world. Though Angel and Giles may function as guardians, Buffy's friendship with Willow is one of the central aspects of the show. Being able to discuss worldly and slayerly problems alike with Willow helps Buffy to overcome complicated situations in both her every day and slayer-related life. The emotional support Buffy gains from her friendship with Willow emphasizes Ross's argument that: "a woman can be 'tough enough' to fight patriarchy when she learns to listen to other women's perspectives on the world and when she values her emotional bonds with other females as

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<sup>100</sup> See above, chapter 3.1.

a source of strength” (231). In contrast to Ross’s claim, Buffy’s source of strength is not limited to her female friends, but she needs all of the Scoobies. Her friendship with Willow, Xander, and Giles is what enables her to keep living the precarious balance between her duties as the Slayer and being a “normal” teenager, and has actually helped her to survive her duties longer than any other slayer before her (cf. Brannon 2). From the value that is assigned to each of the characters in Buffy’s circle of friends we can conclude that gender does not influence the role which each character performs within this group.

Having reluctantly accepted being the Slayer, albeit on her own terms, and supported by the protective power of her friends, Buffy enters the second stage of the hero’s journey, that of initiation, and begins to fight demons, vampires and other monsters threatening herself, her friends, her school, her hometown, or occasionally, the whole world (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 97 ff.).

While wrestling with the evil forces in and around Sunnydale, one of the most tragic relationships is that of Buffy and her vampire boyfriend Angel. Even though both Buffy and Angel realize that their connection may be difficult or even dangerous, they consummate their love on the night of Buffy’s 17<sup>th</sup> birthday (cf. “Surprise” 2.13). Campbell speaks of the hero’s “Meeting with the Goddess,” in which a woman “represents the totality of what can be known” (Campbell, *Hero* 116). This woman imparts the “final test of the talent of the hero to win the boon of love ... which is life itself enjoyed as the encasement of eternity” (ibid. 118). Providing the adventurer in question is not male but female, then “she is the one who, by her qualities, her beauty, or her yearning is fit to become the consort of an immortal” (ibid. 119). In contrast to the male adventurer, the female hero, according to Campbell, does not possess any agency. If a “meeting with a god” is immanent, then such an encounter tends to look something like this: “[T]he heavenly husband descends to her and conducts her to his bed – whether she will or no. And if she has shunned him, the scales fall from her eyes; if she has sought him, her desire finds its peace” (ibid.). In contrast to this passive suffering of a divine encounter, Buffy very consciously chooses to sleep with Angel, and pursues this goal. Consequently, we can observe that Buffy takes on the active (male) part of the archetypal hero in this situation. However, though Angel is undoubtedly a supernatural creature, he is no god and cannot offer Buffy the “totality of what can be known.” Instead, Angel goes into the relationship with Buffy even more carefully and anxiously than the Slayer.

If both the hero and the “god/goddess” are willing participants, then the result should be peace and happiness (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 118 f.) However, with the consummation of their



love Buffy and Angel do not find eternal peace. Instead, a moment of true bliss, happily forgetting guilt and remorse for one single moment, breaks the curse that once restored Angel's soul (cf. "Innocence" 2.14). Without a soul Angel reverts back to a monster without a conscience and goes back to his old ways of killing and torturing humans, taking a special delight in hurting Buffy physically, spiritually and emotionally. *BtVS*'s interpretation of Buffy's "Meeting the God" can be seen as exceptionally different from the patterns described by Campbell. Indeed the hero, Buffy, wins the love of a supernatural being, but even though this love is mutual, the story does not end happily. Instead, the "god" turns into an evil monster, through no fault of the hero, and needs to be eliminated eventually. Translated into *BtVS* narrative this means that Buffy is forced to remove Angel from her world by running him through with a sword, thereby closing a portal to a hell dimension which would ultimately have destroyed the world. To further dramatize the story, Angel's soul is once more restored in the very moment that Buffy stabs him and he is pulled into the portal. In contrast to Campbell's established patterns, this narrative illustrates that the modern, female archetypal hero, does not need a "God" to fulfill her. Instead she challenges "patriarchal institutional arrangements" (Ross 231), in that she takes agency and eliminates the "god" who is unable to give her true happiness, for the sake of humanity. Nevertheless, one of the functions of the "Goddess" in archetypal narratives of the hero's quest has been fulfilled: the hero was given a decisive challenge, and her knowledge of the world – as tragic as it might have been – has been expanded.

Throughout the series, Buffy dies twice and is returned to life both times.<sup>101</sup> At the end of the first season she drowns in a puddle of water, after facing and losing against the ancient vampire "The Master" (cf. "Prophecy Girl" 1.12). She is resuscitated with CPR by her friend Xander. The other time Buffy dies comes at the end of season five. Here, she sacrifices herself to save her sister Dawn, and ultimately, the whole world from the brink of an apocalypse (cf. "The Gift" 5.22). Buffy's friends, who fear her soul to be lost in a horrible hell dimension, literally bring her back from the grave by magic.

The archetypal hero, according to Campbell, undergoes a process referred to as "Apotheosis." Campbell explains this to be "the divine state to which the human hero attains who has gone beyond the last terrors of ignorance" (151). Examining Australian myths, Campbell asserts that having reached apotheosis the realization is gained that "death [is] not the end. New life, new birth, new knowledge of existence [...] [is] given us"

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<sup>101</sup> Both incidents of Buffy's death and subsequent "rebirth" will be examined in more detail below in chapter six.

(ibid. 162). Overcoming his own ego, the hero is prepared to sacrifice himself. The creators of *BtVS* exponentiate the idea of apotheosis in the archetypal hero's journey, as Buffy goes through the process of dying and being reborn not only once, but twice. In both situations Buffy willingly and consciously chooses to die, as her sacrifice is the last possible option to save the world. Thus, Buffy experiences an apotheosis not only once, but twice, and gains new strength and wisdom from these experiences which help her to better serve her community (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 151 f.).

Coming back from the dead has a profound impact on Buffy's character both times. After being killed by the Master Buffy develops an attitude of overt aggression to the point of being cruel and dismissive to her best friends. Unable to overcome her own fears of what she has experienced and what she presumes lies ahead, Buffy turns on her companions until she is able to free herself from her nightmares by rescuing those closest to her from a trap laid by the Master's former helpers intend on resurrecting the ancient vampire once more. Eventually Buffy finds closure when she physically destroys the skeletal remains of what once was the Master. If the archetypal hero who has had a supernatural experience, cannot or will not, find the way back to the common world in the third stage of his quest, the Return stage, he may need "Rescue From Without" (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 207 ff.). The first part of this rescue is Xander's CPR, which brings Buffy back to life, but the second step, to help Buffy accept her role in the larger context of the world again, is much harder to carry out. Only by the indirect help of her friends, i.e., Buffy having to save them, and by the physical act of destroying the Master's remains, symbolizing Buffy's deepest fears, is the hero able to return to the world she has left.

The second time Buffy returns to the world of the living again comes to pass by a "Rescue from Without," when her friends perform a magical ritual to save her from what they believe is a tortured existence. However, as the audience learns a few episodes after the successful resurrection, Buffy had been content in her state of apotheosis and believed herself to be in Heaven. In this realm "There was no pain / No fear, no doubt / Till they pulled me out / Of Heaven" ("Once More With Feeling" 6.07). If the archetypal hero has found bliss and happiness in the other world he may state an adamant "Refusal of the Return" (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 193). Since Buffy is given no choice about her return to Sunnydale, it is little surprising that she then experiences the sorrows of "The Crossing of the Return Threshold":

The first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real, after an experience of the soul-satisfying vision of fulfillment, the passing joys and sorrows, banalities

and noisy obscenities of life. Why re-enter such a world? Why attempt to make plausible, or even interesting, to men and women consumed with passion, the experience of transcendental bliss? (Campbell, *Hero* 218)

If we consider Buffy to be a returning hero and the experience of transcendental bliss the acceptance that she, as a slayer, was given supernatural powers to protect her society, then Buffy's experience can easily be interpreted as that of an archetypal hero in Campbell's sense.

Buffy returns to the world after death, and eventually attains the "Freedom to Live," the final step in the return stage, in which the hero passes on an artifact or the spiritual insight he has gained as a result of his journey to the world at large. If we interpret Buffy's "boon" to be her restored supernatural powers as a slayer, and wisdom attained through her struggles for independence and agency, it is interesting in which form she chooses to pass on these abilities to the community of mankind. Campbell claims that "man in the world of action loses his centering in the principle of eternity if he is anxious for the outcome of his deeds, but resting them and their fruits on the knees of the Living God he is released by them, as by a sacrifice, from the bondages of the sea of death" (239). However, Buffy does not sacrifice her agency, or her powers to any divine and/or powerful entity in order to fight her ultimate challenge: the First Evil (cf. *BtVS*, season seven). Buffy takes the powers imbued in a magical artifact to divide her own strength as the Slayer equally among all the potential slayers in the world. She refuses to let a tradition continue, in which other girls would presumably suffer the way she did because some men, a few hundred years ago, created and laid down the rules for the Slayer. Buffy rebels against these ancient creators and in turn bestows the supernatural powers of the Slayer upon dozens of potential slayers. Thus she is no longer the "chosen one," alone in her destiny facing the eternal struggle between good and evil, but the powers she has never wished for, are now spread all over the world to make a change. Brannon interprets this event as putting an emphasis on the agency of the hero, as well as a sign for the ultimate break with patriarchal power relationships:

In the final episode "Chosen" (7.22), Xander says 'We saved the world,' to which Willow replies, 'We *changed* the world.' This exchange underscores the nature of the boon that Buffy bestows from her quest: power as shared phenomenon rather than power concentrated and controlled. In this way Buffy defeats the enemy she'd

fought for seven years: an isolation enforced by a patriarchal structure that feared the power which it bestowed. (1-2, emphasis Brannon)

Demanding agency and refusing traditional power systems clearly distinguishes Buffy from Campbell's archetypal hero. Though Buffy passes through the various phases in the departure, the initiation and the return stage, and thus can be said to show similarities to the archetypal hero, she diverts from established patterns through her continuous assertion of agency. While Campbell stresses that the journey of the hero must naturally be travelled alone, Buffy Summers refuses to give up her strong ties to friends and family, and separate them from her quest. As we have already ascertained above, drawing strength from female friends and family is a particular characteristic of the contemporary female action hero (cf. Ross 231). In Buffy's case, however, the gender, or even the species, of her companions is less exclusive. The "Scooby Gang," i.e., those people closest to her, without whom Buffy could not be the hero she is, are both female and male, human and supernatural beings.<sup>102</sup>

Even though, or perhaps because of her own supernatural powers, Buffy does not put much trust in higher authorities or divine entities. She strongly resents her life being directed by others<sup>103</sup> and fights passionately for the right of self-determination. Both the inherent distrust of authorities and the insistence on self-determination are modern deviations from Campbell's archetypal hero. They can also be interpreted as an Americanization of the classical hero figure. From the Constitution to Thoreau to the often nonsensical arguments of the contemporary Tea Party, non-interference by the government in the private lives of the citizens and a right for self-government has been part of American culture since the very inception of the United States.

In conclusion we can say that Buffy Summers retains strong characteristics of an archetypal hero as described by Campbell, such as being "chosen," going on quests, suffering, and prevailing. However, by sharing her superpowers with society, it is clear, that the creators of *BtVS* adapted the concept of heroism to fit more contemporary aspects of identity formation. Heineken suggests that in *BtVS* "identity is constructed through process, relationship and the physical sensations and experiences, both positive and

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<sup>102</sup> Aside from her best friends Willow and Xander, as well as Buffy's mentor Rupert Giles, other members of this "Scooby Gang" are, for example, Angel and Spike, both vampires, and Xander's girlfriend Anya, a former vengeance demon.

<sup>103</sup> Buffy resents being a "chosen," i.e., being the Slayer in the very beginning of the narrative. In the first season of the show, Buffy also refuses to be "guided" by the Watchers Council. She accepts her personal watcher Rupert Giles as a friend and father figure, but not as an authority to control her life.

negative, of being in the world” (*Hero* 131). This stands in stark contrast to the male-centered texts which Campbell has outlined for the archetypal hero.

Television characters can only be believable and popular, if the viewer is able to understand the immediacy of the culture and society in which those characters act. The audience needs to be aware of “the multiple and contradictory choices available from day to day which have the potential to be selected for future ways of seeing” (Fiske and Hartley 18). A successful television show has to deliver characters and storylines on which we as viewers are in “agreement with the way that it is made, with the adequacy of our discourses and their cultural categories as a means of ordering our perception of both text and world” (Fiske, *Culture* 178). As already pointed out above, *BtVS* offers characters which are easy to identify with, because of their use of contemporary cultural imagery. Heinecken even claims that *BtVS* has a unique approach to connect the viewer with the television series:

Far more than most shows, *Buffy* breaks down the separation between viewer and text. Camp, the use of metaphors made literal, and a narrative that is concerned with community, relationships and feeling are rhetorical devices which urge the viewer to relate to the text in specific ways [...] the viewer is constantly urged to recognize the texts as highly ‘realistic’ because *Buffy* offers an impression of what the world feels like. This feeling is both constructed in and extends upon an already existing cultural space of the imaginary. Participating in the text allows viewers to connect to this sense of larger imaginary community.” (100)

*BtVS* thus delivers a hero which preserves particular archetypal features, but is not limited by them. *Buffy Summers* travels on some of the paths of the archetypal hero that Campbell illustrated, but she does so as a modern and independent woman who lives by her own choices.

### **Sara Pezzini**

Sara Pezzini “finds” the Witchblade, when she pursues an assassin into a museum. During a shoot-out, Sara is flying through the air for cover. The Witchblade that was part of the exhibit is dislodged from its glass case, magically turns in mid-air and attaches itself to Sara’s right hand. Not needing much interpretation, this action sequence is intercut with a close-up of the hands in Michelangelo’s painting “Creation of Adam,” thus letting the audiences know that they are about to witness the creation of a hero. Looking at

Campbell's journey of the archetypal hero, the hero may stumble upon his "Call to Adventure" by accident: "A blunder – apparently the merest chance – reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (*Hero*, 51). This is exactly what is happening to Sara at this moment. A mere coincident seems to bring Sara and the Witchblade together. The museum itself can be interpreted as a place where "the underestimated appearance of the power of destiny" (ibid. 52) is revealed. Ian Nottingham, dressed in dark clothes, black cap and black beard, whom Sara meets shortly before connecting with the Witchblade, fulfills the role of the herald or the announcer of the adventure (cf. ibid. 53). Furthermore, the connection that Sara and the Witchblade have, corresponds to the first step in Campbell's journey of the hero: "That which has to be faced, and is somehow profoundly familiar to the unconscious – though unknown – surprising, and even frightening to the conscious personality – makes itself known" (ibid. 55). So, the curtain has been drawn back and Sara embarks on an adventure which she is unable to comprehend at that time. At this point we can say that the setting up of Sara Pezzini as a hero figure closely follows traditional patterns described by Campbell. The fact that she is female does not make any noticeable difference so far.

Throughout his journey, the archetypal hero, according to Campbell, often has aids to guide and help him on his way. Sara Pezzini has such aids. As mentioned above, Sara has a close relationship with her partner Danny Woo. When Danny is shot in the pilot episode, he nevertheless continues to assist Sara as a spirit guide. Danny helps Sara to understand the powers of the Witchblade – one of which is the ability to see beyond the realm of the living and communicate with spirits – and the mysteries that are hidden to other people. In Campbell's terms, Danny acts as a "protective power of destiny" (*Hero* 69), providing Sara with help in her work and personal life. In turn Sara depends on the advice of her friend and trusts him implicitly. She accepts that "the toughest hero is a flexible one who relies on others" (Ross 233). David Greven likens the relationship between Sara and Danny as resembling another duo from American literature. He sees Sara as emulating a classic form of the male (American) hero: "the cowboy," specifically the mysterious gunslinger. More specifically, Greven compares Sara and Danny to James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook from *Last of the Mohicans*, respectively:

Much like Natty, Sarah [sic], associated with cowboy justice (vigilantism, a penchant for killing criminals), follows her own moral code, often opposed to the 'law and order' she ostensibly upholds [...] An isolated cowboy in the guise of a modern woman, whose law-and-order-defying Witchblade antics (much like Natty's forest

wildness) ensure her status as a renegade, Sarah [sic] enjoys a pure marriage of minds with Danny, who provides her with the uncanny edge of his exotic expertise (146).

Though I feel that the comparison between Sara and Natty seems rather far-fetched, I do agree with Greven that Sara definitely fits the archetypal image of a modern American cowboy figure.

A further aid to Sara on her quest to find her destiny is Ian Nottingham. Initially sent by Kenneth Irons to observe her worthiness as a wielder of the Witchblade, Nottingham soon becomes Sara's guardian, helping her out of dangerous situations and saving her life. The fact that he often assists Sara without her knowing about this again matches Campbell's finding that "the hero is helped covertly by the supernatural helper" (Campbell, *Hero* 97).

Even though helper figures are part of the archetypal hero's journey, the relationship of Sara and Danny goes beyond the "hero and sidekick" connection which is a common motif in literature, film and television. They are partners and friends, and are spiritually linked even beyond the death of Danny. I think the connection between Sara and Denny is further evidence of the female action hero transcending Campbell's patterns. Sara acknowledges the importance of other people's help for both her work and her life, and thus supersedes the exclusively lone hero of Western mythology.

When entering the stage of initiation, the archetypal hero "moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials" (Campbell, *Hero* 97). With the help of the Witchblade, Sara becomes part of this "dream landscape" i.e., the world of the supernatural. Setting up such supernatural trials next to historical events and people increases the credibility and fictional authenticity of the narrative. In the episode "Legion" (1.05), for example, the background of a murder case, in which a Catholic priest is killed in his church, leads to uncovering disturbing information on power relations during WW II. During the episode the audience learns that the Witchblade, once taken from Joan of Arc, was kept in the Vatican for the past 500 years and used in acutely dangerous situations. One of these situations involved a pact between Pope Pius XII and Adolf Hitler. Hitler promised to leave the Catholic Church alone if the Church agreed to look the other way on any German atrocities. As a sign of goodwill

Hitler requested and was given the Witchblade.<sup>104</sup> Communicating through the blade with the murdered Monsignore Bellamy, Sara learns that the Church still believes to be the true owner of the blade and wants it back. Apparently, however, there are also other powers who wish to obtain the artifact. The enemy comes in the form of a demon, appearing as a high ranking Catholic cleric. In his demon form, he calls himself “Legion,” the name used in the biblical story of a Christ healing a man who was possessed by this demon consisting of uncountable apparitions.

The subsequent confrontation between Sara and the demon is spectacular, as both combatants seem to enter different realms during the battle. Sara and the demon take to the air, first inside the church where the priest was killed, but then the background changes to a yellow-tinted, burning sky, with lightning cutting through the clouds. Without further comment the audience can understand that this battle represents the eternal struggle between good and evil, and the battle happens in a realm between heaven and hell. For Sara Pezzini this fight means looking past the gates of death, past the gates of heaven and hell, and past the gates of time, which prepares her for yet another stage in Campbell’s journey of the archetypal hero: the Apotheosis.

As we have also seen in the cases of Xena and Buffy, the archetypal hero may live through an “Apotheosis” on his journey. This means that his consciousness is expanded in a breakthrough experience: “When the envelopment of consciousness has been annihilated, then he becomes free of all fear, beyond the reach of change” (Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra, qt. in Campbell, *Hero* 151). Sara experiences such an expansion of her own consciousness during the “Periculum” (cf. 1.07), a test of worthiness initiated by the Witchblade itself. During this trial, Sara’s body is tied to her bed by tentacle-like ropes that extend from the Witchblade. Her spirit meanwhile walks in different dimensions, encountering wielders of the past, such as the Irish goddess queen Cathain, Joan of Arc, or her own grandmother Elizabeth Bronte, who used to be a spy in Nazi Germany. The Witchblade’s trial is far from harmless. While Sara’s spirit has to prove her worth, her body, back in the apartment, is slowly dying. In the spirit world Sara is questioned which battlefield she fights on in her time as the wielder of the blade. She replies that “the whole human race has gone insane” but that she cannot do anything about it. But Joan of Arc tells her that this is exactly her purpose: “Insane. From the Latin: unclean. *You* are the cleansing

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<sup>104</sup> One question which would arise from this situation, but is never addressed in the series, is if the Vatican simply “stored” the Witchblade, or if they had female warriors to wield the blade. Also, who in Nazi Germany would have been able to use the Witchblade? Or would it simply have been a status symbol?



Sara. You will make them pure” (emphasis of the actress). Soon thereafter, Sara is interrogated by the apparition of Cathain, who enquires whether Sara would be willing to sacrifice her life in order to achieve her destiny of cleaning the world. To which Sara simply replies “sure”. Finally, talking to her grandmother, Elizabeth Bronte, Sara admits that she would feel “released” from the fear she constantly carries around with her, if she were to die. However, she also says how disappointed she would be, since there was so much she still wanted to do: “I haven’t finished yet” (ibid.). Having arrived at this epiphany, Elizabeth sends Sara back to her world declaring her finally ready to pursue her destiny: “Today, Sara Pezzini, you have become a true warrior. Walk forward in your truth”. Sara experiences a trial of her own consciousness during the “Periculum” through which she is led to the realization of her own destiny, determined to give her life in order to reach this goal. Thus we can observe Sara’s “Apotheosis” when she faces the trial and wins the Witchblade’s test determining its wielder’s worthiness. Sara’s prize is not only the approval of the Witchblade, but also that she is now clear about her vocation, about “The Ultimate Boon” (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 172), i.e., cleansing the world of its insanity. Knowledge about the interconnectedness of time, life and death has given the detective the power to continue her struggles in her own time and world: “The mind breaks the bounding sphere of the cosmos to a realization transcending all experiences of form – all symbolizations, all divinities” (ibid. 190).

With that realization Sara returns to her apartment, her community, and her world. Having accepted the powers of the Witchblade and her own abilities, Sara has become a “Master of the Two Worlds” (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 229). She has gained the “freedom to pass back and forth across the world division” (ibid.), i.e., Sara can use the Witchblade, and “pierce the veil of the senses” (Irons, Pilot Episode) to fulfill her destiny.

In true archetypal hero fashion Sara Pezzini passes through the stages of departure, initiation and return, as Campbell has described in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Much more than Xena or Buffy, Sara Pezzini is molded after Campbell’s archetypal hero. However, she too, transcends the male centered narratives of Western mythology. Sara’s strength lies in her ability to listen to the advice of others and her adaptability when facing the challenges of her life. Crucial to her strength is her relationship with Danny. Ross has claimed that “women’s interdependency brings them the resources they need to fix problems in their worlds” (241). Even though Ross discusses the relationship between women in her essay, I think that gender matters little when it comes to the heroes drawing strength from others. Only because Danny is a male friend does not mean that the audience

is faced with a patriarchal model in which power is generously bestowed upon women by men. Danny provides Sara with the resources she needs to solve her cases and navigate the supernatural world of the *Witchblade*. By accepting and working with Danny's knowledge, Sara transcends traditional Western narratives.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of the chapter we posed the question whether contemporary female action heroes differed from the mythological tradition of the male hero in Western culture. As we have seen from the three examples of Xena, Buffy and Sara Pezzini the answer is: yes, even though the differences are relatively subtle. The archetypal hero changes as much and as often as the society in which he/she is established. This means that a hero figure needs to be adaptable to renegotiate culture, and to be able to solve problematic questions of the modern-day community. Consequently, the action hero on American television has changed very much over the past 30-40 years. The male hero with almost omnipotent powers, gave way to a more sensitive, more troubled depiction of a man which corresponds to a contemporary society of increasing diversity. At the same time women in action films and television series were increasingly depicted as strong and tough with equal or even superior physical and intellectual abilities to their male colleagues. Nevertheless, female action heroes may just be as troubled as their male counterparts. In general, the construction of an archetypal heroic figure and his or her journey, as detailed by Joseph Campbell, is relatively similar for male and female heroes and not necessarily gender specific. Still, when women are at the center of an action series, there are some notable differences between the depictions of a male or female archetypal hero. Whereas the traditional – male – hero figure may have helpers to guide him on his way to win the prize, solve the puzzle and return to society bringing with him beneficial knowledge for everyone, all-in-all he is utterly self-reliant, perhaps to the point of being called egocentric. The female archetypal hero, passing through the stages of her quest will typically have one or more companions with her, who may rise in their status to an equally heroic presence. Though often the most important relationships female action heroes have are with other women, friendships with men can be equally crucial to the hero's journey.<sup>105</sup> With the

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<sup>105</sup> Even though we have acknowledged the interdependence between the female action hero and her companions as a gendered difference compared to traditional male-centered narratives, I would like to speculate that perhaps we are not so much seeing distinctive patterns that are gender coded, but a contemporary, dynamic process in the development of the hero figure on American television.

emotional, intellectual and physical support of her companions the female hero will be able to battle the monsters that symbolize the unconscious threats to contemporary society that must be fought. What these unconscious threats to the community may be and how the archetypal images utilized in *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB* can help towards a solution of these problems will be examined more closely in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Classic Myths and Archetypes and their Functions I: “I Am What I Am!” – The Hero and the Archetype of the Self

*Der Archetypus stellt wesentlich einen unbewußten Inhalt dar, welcher durch seine Bewußtwerdung und das Wahrgenommensein verändert wird, und zwar im Sinne des jeweiligen individuellen Bewußtseins, in welchem er auftaucht.*

(Jung, *Archetypen* 9)

Jung has pointed out that an archetype is first and foremost part of the individual and collective unconscious of humankind. Only in visualizations of archetypal images can individuals discern the primal meaning of the archetype (cf. Walker 14). For example, the archetype of the Wise Old Man (cf. Reeves 521) has seen a wide variety of personifications, from the literary Merlin, the wise wizard helping heroic King Arthur, to Obi Wan Kenobi, the Jedi master from the *Star Wars* franchise, aiding young Luke Skywalker in his quest to save the universe. Every culture and every generation may create different incarnations of these archetypes, adapting them for a more contemporary interpretation and understanding. The initial concept does not vary, only the context does. In his *The Political Unconscious* Frederic Jameson has argued that no contemporary text is truly original, or better perhaps, that it never falls on a clean slate:

We never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if the text is brand-new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions. (9)

Any text is necessarily filtered through an individual's knowledge of the past and his or her experiences. These particular understandings of the world, Jameson calls the “political unconscious.” Even stronger than literary texts, modern television is a medium of what Guy Debord has called “the society of the image” or “the society of the spectacle” (cf. Debord). Jameson explains that this type of society is “saturated with messages and with ‘aesthetic experiences of all kinds,’” and older concepts are usually “transformed beyond recognition” (11). Debord goes even further and claims that “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by

images” (12). For television this means that it is a tool to bombard contemporary society with messages and a multitude of “aesthetic experiences,” while at the same time connecting the individuals through shared images.<sup>106</sup> Archetypal images in television are thus transformed, but still clearly recognizable in the pictures and stories television delivers to its viewers on a daily basis. These archetypal images then are used to negotiate norms and belief systems in contemporary culture or, as Jameson has put it, regarding literary texts:

in a sense all literature, no matter how weakly, must be informed by what we have called a political unconscious, that all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community. (70)

Throughout the centuries certain archetypes have become so much a part of literary and cultural history that one can rightfully refer to them as “classic” archetypes. The Wise Old Man would be such a “classic archetype,” as well as the Hero, the Trickster figure, the Shadow, and many others. Out of a multitude of archetypes and myths I have selected the hero figure in its relation to the archetype of the Self, the nemesis figure, the archetype of the Shadow, and the myth of Death and Rebirth to analyze their respective visualizations and functions in *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*. Even though one could easily find more than these few examples of archetypal images and mythologically informed narratives in the three television shows, I have chosen to concentrate on three which are among the most prominently featured archetypes and myths. In this way, I am able to analyze specific topics in depth and outline general tendencies in television productions today in which ancient myths are used to negotiate particular contemporary American values.

### **The Hero and the Archetype of the Self**

The hero is the heart and soul of every good adventure story. We have already seen how important heroes are as cultural role models. But heroes are also helpful when negotiating psychological insecurities and inquiries of a particular time and place. They can (and tend to) be used to mediate ideological messages and confirm or question dominant ideologies.

At first, though, I would like to introduce the archetype of the Self as defined by C.G. Jung and further developed by modern psychology, as this will be one emphasis in the characterization of the heroes of the selected television shows. Part of this examination will

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<sup>106</sup> Regarding serial narratives, especially television series, Frank Kelleter speaks of an “imaginary community” (imaginäre Gemeinschaftlichkeit) which is felt and understood by individual consumers of a series (14 f.).

be to look at how the hero's journey to self-actualization is depicted in the television series. As the concept of the Self is very much connected with the idea of one's "true" personality and the individual, I will consider how dynamics of psychological individuation are combined with the American idea of "individualism," which is reviewed in more detail below. Thus we will be able to see how the development of the heroic characters is used in the negotiation of social and cultural challenges in American society by displaying the essential American trait of individualism.

### **The Archetype of the Self**

One popular topic for characters in dramatic series today is self-actualization, i.e., finding one's "true self." In psychoanalysis this is generally referred to as the process of individuation, which ideally results in something that C.G. Jung has called the archetype of "the Self." This "Self", according to Jungian theory, "operates as the unconscious inner core of an individual's being, as the ultimate principle of harmony and unity" (Walker 84). Even though most laypersons would assume this "Self" to be buried deep inside of us, at the very core of our being, to Jung the concept encompasses much more than that: "The self is not only the centre but also the whole circumference which embraces both conscious and unconscious; it is the centre of this totality, just as the ego is the center of consciousness" (*Psychology and Alchemy* 44). But how to get there? The way is the dynamic process of individuation: "Individuation bedeutet: zum Einzelwesen werden, und, insofern wir unter Individualität unsere innerste, letzte und unvergleichbare Einzigartigkeit verstehen, zum eigenen Selbst werden. Man könne ‚Individuation‘ darum auch als ‚Verselbstung‘ oder ‚Selbstverwirklichung‘ übersetzen" (Jung, *Beziehungen* 65). However, to become an individual, to become conscious of oneself does not automatically include behaving like an egomaniac and losing touch with reality and society. Quite on the contrary, Jung's student Jolande Jacobi argues that by individuation a person's "Beziehung zu den Mitmenschen wird dadurch [Individuation] tiefer, tragfähiger, verantwortungsbewusster und verständnisvoll. Er kann sich ihnen in größerer Freiheit öffnen, da er nicht mehr befürchten muss, von ihnen in Besitz genommen zu werden oder sich an sie zu verlieren" (105). By this Jacobi means that at first a person learns, or is taught, his or her place in society. Once this place is secured, then the process of individuation starts on a more personal level.

With his idea of individuation, Jung and other scholars, such as Sigmund Freud or Friedrich Nietzsche, have laid the foundation for a concept which has since been continually

being discussed and developed further. The French philosopher Bernhard Stiegler, for example, adapts different views on individuation, especially that of Gilbert Simondon, and modifies them. He works with Simondon's theory that there is both an individual and collective individuation which produces an individual and a collective subject (cf. Aubier 1989). Stiegler believes that the individual and collective can only exist and develop in relation to one another. What is more, this process of individuation never stops as we are constantly confronted by a changing world and uncountable new situations (cf. Stiegler, "Constitution and Individuation"). Faced with rapidly spreading globalization on a variety of levels, Stiegler argues for the necessity of inaugurating a new individuation process at the level of individual continents (cf. *Constituer l'Europe*). At the same time he sees that individual and collective individuation is endangered by today's consumerism and consumer capitalism (cf. "The Disaffected Individual"). These ideas are challenging, as they remind us how many different factors may influence a person on the search for his or her "Self".

In contrast to Jung's theory of the Self as the whole of a personality, and individuation the mode to find peace with all the conscious and unconscious parts of one's self, modern psychology, based on Freudian principles, singles out a person's consciousness, the ego, as the crucial factor in the exploration of the psyche (cf. Seidikides and Spencer).

Individuation is closely related to self-actualization, a term well known from modern self-help books and theories. This idea that a human being is driven to explore her capacities has been around for a long time. One of the first to use this term and introduce it to a wider audience was Kurt Goldstein in his 1934 book *The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man*. A few years later Abraham Maslow defined self-actualization somewhat more narrow as: "the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow). This idea of a desire of reaching one's highest potential has since been used in different psychological theories. Contemporary popular culture has embraced the idea of self-actualization and caters to the interested layperson with books like *The Power of Self-Coaching: The Five Essential Steps to Creating the Life you Want* (Luciani), *Unleashed: A Guide to Your Ultimate Self-Actualization* (Hall) or the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of *Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness and*

*Self-Actualization* (Johnson).<sup>107</sup> Geared toward the modern audience, there are multitudes of CDs, videos and DVDs with promises of advice and guidance to help a person become better, more successful and happier.

Examining notions of self-betterment, Michel Foucault has established the so-called “technologies of the self.” According to him, these technologies are methods people use to define who and what they are. Technologies of the self “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (18).

Thus it is not surprising that the investigation of the Self is often an intrinsic part of contemporary television productions. The troubled hero has to face and overcome herself in order to develop into a better, or at least wiser, person. After a quick look at the concept of individualism in American culture I would therefore like to examine which functions the processes of individuation and the archetype of the Self have in *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*.

### **Individualism as an American Character Trait**

In 1893 historian Frederick Jackson Turner read his now famous paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago. Turner’s so-called “frontier thesis” explained how the American frontier, the constant movement westwards, has had a significant impact on the formation of an American identity and unique American character traits:

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. (1-2)

The frontier, this “meeting point between savagery and civilization” (2) Turner deems to be the place where the American “intellect,” i.e., particular character traits, grew out of the difficult life of pioneers to become most essential to an exceptional American personality:

The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and

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<sup>107</sup> The books mentioned (and many more) came up as the result of a quick search on Amazon.com (27. April 2009).



inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity. (13-14)

Thus the frontier stands for the ambiguity of constant re-invention of lifestyle and character, of holding up traditions while at the same time finding new meaning and interpretations of the immediate social and cultural environment:

The stubborn American environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions; the inherited ways of doing things are also there; and yet, in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier. (14)

However, when Turner declared the frontier closed in 1893, he was not the first person to observe a uniquely American tendency towards individualism. About 50 years earlier, Alexis de Tocqueville claimed that Americans “owe nothing to any man; they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands” (9). Ever since de Tocqueville and Turner published their views, the idea and the meaning of “rugged individualism” has become a much discussed key concept in American culture. The value of individualism, which is closely related to notions of self-reliance<sup>108</sup> and the Puritan work ethic, has found widespread acceptance among many Americans (cf. Feldman and Zaller, Hasenfeld and Rafferty, Kluegel and Smith). Consequently, citizens of the United States are often viewed as strongly individualist; perhaps the most individualized society anywhere in the world (cf. Bellah, Inkeles). This focus on individual determination is not necessarily seen as an entirely positive aspect of character. Anthropologist Francis L.K. Hsu has remarked that while “rugged individualism” might well be the source for both “the

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<sup>108</sup> See Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance,” or Henry David Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*.

creativity and the chaos that characterized American culture” (Hirschman 10), it also leads “to crime, violence, and other forms of selfish aggression” (ibid.)

Contrary to notions of an increasingly fundamental individualism, scholars, from the 1980s on, have observed strong liberal and social strains within American culture and society: “In recent years, the United States has edged closer to a creed that celebrates cooperative endeavor, self-abnegation, altruism, multiculturalism, and interpersonal harmony ... while discouraging urges toward physical aggression and unbridled competition” (ibid. 20). Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, and others have begun to question extreme forms of individualism in the United States and propagated communitarianism as a substantial counter force in American society. In their *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment* in American life, Bellah and his co-authors argue that, even though radical individualists may find it difficult to explain why they commit themselves to social causes, they nevertheless are consistently involved in communal life. While drawing from de Tocqueville, Bellah observes that Americans, though adamantly individualistic, are “great joiners, that voluntary associations are a vigorous form of social life in America, that when Americans are disturbed about something they get together to do something about it” (Bellah, *Lecture*). The three public, or semi-public areas Americans tend to get involved in most, de Tocqueville and Bellah see as being local government, religion, and family: “I can only allude to the fact that in spite of the powerful culture of radical, privatized autonomy that I have been describing so far, there are many, many Americans actively engaged in concern for others in a variety of civic, political and religious organizations” (ibid.).

Keith Lehrer attempts to explain the struggle between individualism and communitarianism as a process of compromising, or finding a consensus. Lehrer believes that

the ideal consensus is a commitment of consenting individuals to consensual goals and interests. The commitment to the consensual goals and interests is what the communitarian requires for social identity, but because it is the consensus of consenting individuals, it is formed from their individual goals and interests as the individualist requires. The consensus is the consensus of individuals, and therefore, the individual and communal goals and interests coincide within it. (110)

While somewhat overusing the word “consensus,” Lehrer makes an important observation. Communal goals are generally created because a number of individuals believe those goals

to be important. This idea resembles the hypothesis of this study that television series need to find a common ground in terms of norms and values to be popular with their audiences, and either support or question these value systems through storylines and narratives within the respective series.

The conflict between individualism and communitarianism is still very much alive in the United States of today. In the following, I would like to illustrate how the idea of individualism and the process of individuation in *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB* are depicted, how communitarianism has a place in these television shows and how the hero figure is used to negotiate these notions in contemporary society.

#### **4.1. “Finding Your Way” – Xena’s Struggle for Inner Peace**

In *XWP* the idea of self-actualization is often a primary focus of the narration. Both protagonists, Xena and Gabrielle, aim to find “their way,” and much of the fourth and fifth seasons of *XWP* are dedicated to following this journey very closely. While Xena and Gabrielle attempt to reach, as Michel Foucault put it, “a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (18), they represent at the same time a “dominant individualism, working for good and for evil” (Turner 14) which Frederick Jackson Turner has defined as one of the most valuable characteristics of the American intellect.

The premise of the character Xena of Amphipolis in *XWP* is that the formidable ex-warlord is seeking atonement for the violent actions of her past life. She does so by using her almost supernatural fighting skills to help the weak and punish the wicked. Nevertheless, Xena is constantly afraid of a relapse, a return to that dark place inside herself, where aggression used to be her most effective means of survival. After her reformation, initiated by Hercules and thereafter accompanied by her friend Gabrielle, Xena is now looking for a new identity, to overcome this “dark side.” Modern psychoanalysis, as well as the writers of *XWP*, would agree that this feat can only be achieved by facing her problems. Individuation and the archetype of the Self thus stand at the core of the narrative. Self-actualization for Xena, finding her true “Self,” as well as becoming a content individual, means coping with and eventually accepting the dark side of herself as a necessary part of her persona. Without this element of dark energy, Xena could never be the hero she needs to be. In this respect Xena is closer to Jung’s idea of the Self as “the ultimate principle of unity and harmony” (Walker 84) than the Freudian focus on the ego as the primary factor in the development and change of a person. In *XWP* we can also distinguish individuation on a very personal as well as on a larger, more social, level. Xena needs to come to terms with the changes of her inner persona, and at the same time she must learn to create herself as a social individual (cf. Stiegler, “Constitution and Individuation”). As a fledgling hero for the people, the former warlord Xena needs to learn a new set of rules to deal with a world in which violence is the last resort instead of first contact.

Even though Xena and Gabrielle’s quest for ultimate peace is a continuing element throughout the whole series, I have chosen two episodes in which the idea of self-actualization through self-acceptance and the emphasis on individualism are especially strong. Both “Dreamworker” (1.03) and “Paradise Found” (4.13) focus on the character

development of Xena and Gabrielle, ultimately bringing them another step closer to their own, individual Selves.

### **“Dreamworker” (1.03)**

As the third episode of the series to be aired, “Dreamworker” establishes some of the most pronounced anxieties for both of the main protagonists, Xena and Gabrielle, which are worked through during the different seasons of the show. A recurring concern of Gabrielle’s is to be a burden to the Warrior Princess, resulting from the inability of the bard to fight or even defend herself in battle. Whereas Xena tries to convince her friend that, once she has killed, her whole life will change and that Gabrielle’s “blood innocence” is a precious thing to protect, the bard finds these apparent truths hard to accept. Gabrielle, being the younger and less experienced one of the team may well offer various points of identification for those of the show’s target group who are strongly invested in the process of forming a self-identity themselves. At this point in the series, Gabrielle is depicted as a rather average person. The daughter of a farmer, Gabrielle has few exciting talents. She talks too much and her naiveté often gets her into trouble. On the other hand Gabrielle’s qualities of being a friendly and caring person, as well as her innocence in encountering people and life in general, are constantly praised and upheld by the narrative. The idea that every person has individual traits and characteristics which are valuable and important for their personal happiness and their society is strongly promoted in *XWP*.

Equipped with brains and brawns that make her seem almost invincible, Xena nevertheless struggles with self-identity and self-actualization as much as Gabrielle does. Having chosen to rigorously change her lifestyle, Xena is struggling to find a persona that she and her community can live with. Naturally, ten years as a brutal warlord have left many marks on Xena, physically and mentally. The Warrior Princess has accumulated a multitude of demons in that past life which need to be conquered now if Xena wants to find peace and happiness. Xena represents a more mature person who is struggling to change her life. The ruthless warlord of old can easily be adapted to popular images of a drug dealer, an alcoholic, or anyone else feeling the need for a radical change of their lifestyles in contemporary American society.

In “Dreamworker” Gabrielle is kidnapped by a strange cult that worships a distorted version of Morpheus, the god of dreams. As his potential bride Gabrielle has to overcome a number of challenges. The primary idea behind these challenges is that Gabrielle loses her “blood innocence,” i.e., that she is forced to kill in order to survive. As soon as that

happens Gabrielle is to be sacrificed as Morpheus' bride. Realizing that she does not stand a chance (in terms of battle techniques) against the warriors she is faced with, Gabrielle remembers what Xena has told her at the beginning of the episode:

Gabrielle: I don't want to learn to kill. I want to learn to survive.  
Xena: All right. The rules of survival. Number one: If you can run – run. Number two: If you can't run – surrender, and then run. Number three: If you're outnumbered, let them fight each other while you run. Number four...  
Gabrielle: Wait. More running?  
Xena: No. Four is where you talk your way out of it, and I know you can do that. It's wisdom before weapons, Gabrielle.

In the course of the challenges Gabrielle runs, lets the bad guys fight each other and talks her way out of a seemingly hopeless situation. Whether it is pure survival instinct, knowing that she will be sacrificed if she spills blood, or the suspicion that it might indeed be better to keep her "blood innocence" as long as possible, Gabrielle refrains from using force to survive. Even when the final challenge requires her to kill or else be killed herself, she throws down the sword given to her and is rescued from this dangerous situation by Xena, who has no qualms whatsoever about fighting her way out of the trap.

Gabrielle's behavior in this episode strongly advocates both individualistic character traits, and cooperation based on friendship. When the bard realizes that she will not be able to overcome her trials by fighting like a warrior, she uses the skills available to her in this particular situation. Considering her own limitations, her personal "frontier" in this position, Gabrielle shows qualities which Turner described as "that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients" (14). Having learned from travelling with Xena through the wilderness of ancient Greece that you have to rely on yourself (and perhaps family or friends) in order to survive in an often hostile environment, Gabrielle displays character traits which are strongly related to the American concept of individualism. When challenged with physically overwhelming situations, the bard uses her gift of the gab to talk herself out of trouble. She uses cunning instead of power to bring down her attackers and shows strong moral convictions by throwing down the sword instead of trying to defend herself with the weapon. Therefore we can say that the character of Gabrielle is shown to embody American values such as individualism and creative thinking or the "inventive turn of mind" as Turner calls it.

In order to liberate her kidnapped friend, Xena is willing to risk her own life. With the help of the blind mystic Elkton, a former member of the cult, she has been introduced to the

“dreamscape,” the realm of Morpheus, where she is subject to severe challenges. Highly interesting, from a psychological point of view, is a revelation about Xena’s “dream passage,” which refers to a spiritual journey to be taken entirely within her subconscious:

Xena:                   What can I expect?  
Elkton :               Everything in the dreamscape comes from your own mind.  
                             Once in, Morpheus will know everything that you know. He will  
                             use that to try and stop you.

Xena’s “dream passage” here symbolizes the psychoanalytical process of individuation. Though initially setting out to seek her friend Gabrielle, Xena must first face her past and her dark side, in order to evolve spiritually and socially. As soon as Xena enters her dream passage, she is faced with the victims of her former life, i.e., people she ruthlessly killed while being a warlord. The apparitions of those slain seem to crowd in Xena, and she calls out to them:

Xena:                   Stand back!  
Dead Villager One:   We’re not crowding you, Xena.  
Dead Villager Two:   It’s the weight of your conscience.

During the journey through her own mind Xena is led to acknowledge the person she was before she can hope to change and become a “better” person. The writers of this episode emphasize the importance of this self-encounter when Xena eventually comes across a *doppelganger* figure. An apparition of the Warrior Princess as she was before reformation, representing the “dark side” of Xena, is now tempting that part of the warrior who is struggling with the new life she has chosen:

Evil Xena:            You can’t go through that door until you have the key. And you  
                             can’t go through life trying to deny that I’m the real you. We were  
                             so happy all those years. Don’t you remember? Putting fear into all.  
                             Pushing aside those who stood in our way. Taking what we wanted.  
                             Ah, those were the days.  
Xena:                   That wasn’t me. That was never who I really was.  
Evil Xena:            Oh. Well, let me ask you this. Back then, didn’t it feel right?  
                             Everything we did felt right. It felt ... good.  
Xena:                   But it wasn’t.  
Evil Xena:            Oh, how would you know? You think this goody-goody act of yours  
                             is going to last? There’s no glory in being a hero. Ask around.  
                             You’re weak without me, Xena. But the fire is still there. Join me.  
Xena:                   All through this Dreamscape Passage, I’ve had to fight people I’ve  
                             killed before. And I couldn’t bring myself to kill ‘em again. But as I  
                             face you, I realize it can mean only one thing.  
Evil Xena:            Yes ... it means what? Tell me.  
Xena:                   It means I finally get to kill you.

The ensuing fight between the Evil Xena of the past and the Good Xena<sup>109</sup> of today could well symbolize the ultimate struggle between ego and id; taking control of those desires that are anti-social, and surpassing them. In this particular scene Evil Xena embraces characteristics of what Jung and his students have described as the archetype of the Shadow.<sup>110</sup> The Shadow is understood as something primitive, maladjusted and awkward (cf. Jacobi 114, also Jung, *Psychology and Religion* 12). Though the Shadow cannot be said to be evil as such, it encompasses those parts of a person which are usually repressed as they would disturb an individual's place in society. For Xena, simply killing the disruptive "other" is absolutely possible. Unfortunately though, it would not lead to the personal growth desired. In order to recognize the "Self" of a persona, one has to acknowledge those parts, that are least wanted. By accepting those parts one is then able to put them into the right perspective according to social norms and ideals. Being an egocentric, ruthless warrior may be what Xena seeks to overcome, yet she has to acknowledge that this time of her life has been an important requisite to the person she is now:

Evil Xena: No, no, my sister. You can't leave. You still haven't found the key. You take for granted all your gifts and talents: me. Everything you are today came from me. Every spark of noble quality that made you a great leader ... me. The strength that made men tremble at your name ... it all came from me! You understand?

Xena: I understand. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't exist. Whether I like it or not, you're the key. You're the key. There's only one way out of this Dreamscape ... you!

Thus understanding and accepting the "dark side" of herself, Xena is finally able to overcome it and find the way out of her dream passage in order to save her friend Gabrielle. Both Xena and Gabrielle have taken important steps towards finding their "true selves." By accepting their limitations and yet overcoming challenges while using individual skills, the heroes are shown to be clever, self-reliant and yet interested in the well-being of the other. The more the audience learns about Xena and Gabrielle, especially their weaknesses and strengths, the more they feel connected to the main protagonists. The problems discussed in the show and the solutions offered can be used by the viewer to

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<sup>109</sup> To make it easier for the audience to distinguish between "Evil Xena" and "Good Xena," the actress wears a flowing Asian kimono-style garb as a representation of the "old" Xena and her usual leather armor as the "new" Xena. The choice of showing the "evil" side of Xena in a rather non-belligerent outfit is a rather striking choice but unfortunately cannot be examined any closer here.

<sup>110</sup> A full introduction to the archetype of the Shadow follows below in chapter 5.



examine their own personal troubles and overcome them. By emphasizing the well-known concept of individualism, identification with the heroes is facilitated and messages such as in this episode “brain over brawn,” are more easily received.

The notion of individual happiness, as well as to not only accept less desirable characteristics of your persona, but to recognize them as potentially helpful, is even more strongly promoted in the episode “Paradise Found” (4.13).

### **“Paradise Found” (4.13)**

Incorporating literary elements ranging from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, this *XWP* episode focuses once again on individuation and finding a person’s “true Self.” Furthermore, it also deals with a very contemporary topic: the problem of false prophets. In tune with the many self-help books mentioned above, American culture is full of self-appointed prophets, claiming to have found the solution for every problem in life. From televangelists like Billy Graham, to more scientifically minded supporters of the Theory of Everything,<sup>111</sup> etc. Often, the effectiveness of these theories stands in direct relationship to the money it will cost you to acquire them. However, that the price for personal enlightenment may at times be too high is one of the points critically depicted in “Paradise Found.”

During the fourth season of *XWP* the focus of the narrative is on the spiritual quest of Gabrielle. By now the bard has become a proficient fighter and her “blood innocence” has long been lost. Despite all that, she is convinced that her true calling is a way of love and peace. Xena, accompanying Gabrielle on this quest has come to realize that her way is that of the warrior and to continue fighting for a “greater good.” “Paradise Found” is the first episode of a story arc which leads Xena and Gabrielle to India in search of spiritual growth. The choice of having the main protagonists travel to India instead of, e.g., China, where Xena once lived and learned about spiritual powers from her friend Lao Ma, is an interesting one. It is somewhat reminiscent of the search for spiritual liberation which drew many Americans and West Europeans, famous among them for example The Beatles, or beat poet Allen Ginsberg, to India in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Though some may have actually found helpful education, other applauded, self-proclaimed gurus became renowned for using and abusing their followers, such as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. In

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<sup>111</sup> Ken Wilber in his 2001 book *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality* explains how this TOE, as the Theory of Everything is often referred to, can help a person in business or education and how it may even be used to address world conflicts.

choosing India as one important stage of Gabrielle's spiritual quest, the creators of *XWP* draw on familiar images of eastern spirituality that Western culture has been acquainted with for several decades.

On their way to India, Xena and Gabrielle come upon a cave in which they fall, Alice-like, down a hole and find themselves in a strange world. A pastoral garden with birds and animals, as well as many artistically arranged blue stone sculptures, is the home of a man calling himself Aidan. Clad in colorful, billowing clothes, soft-spoken and charismatic, the bald man looks very much like the male version of Jeannie from the *I Dream of Jeannie* series. The figure of Aidan here follows established imagery for a particular breed of supernatural creatures with a touch of New Age and pop culture to facilitate recognition. By using these coded images, the audience is given visual hints as to the ambivalent character of Aidan. Nevertheless, when Aidan first elucidates his apparent wisdom it seems to be exactly what Gabrielle is looking for:

Aidan:            You see, these figures represent the ultimate, inner peace ... something anyone can achieve [...] [It] took me almost ten years, but then my demons ran deep. You can't get rid of those overnight, but you can eventually release them. I'm living proof.

Whereas Xena remains skeptical, Gabrielle embraces Aidan's yoga techniques with the fervent hope to find peace and harmony. However, promises of peace and harmony are only the beginning. Aidan manages to lure Gabrielle further onto his own path by explaining to the bard that she could even gain supernatural powers if she were to follow Aidan's teachings:

Aidan:            You wanna heal the world, right? And I believe you can. But first, you've got to *heal* yourself. It's gonna be hard, but that's the only way you're going to access that power.

Gabrielle:        You're saying that if I do this, that I can create ... a perfect world just by thinking it?

Aidan:            Exactly. Once you tap into that inner stillness you can do absolutely anything. You just envision it. Then make it real.

Aside from being a supernatural, and, as the audience will learn eventually, a rather evil, creature, Aidan works as any successful modern guru would. He looks for the psychological weaknesses in people and uses those to gain people's trust. He recognizes the hopes and dreams of those who come to him and assures them of their own potential to reach these goals with him as a guide. Any skeptics who refuse being controlled by Aidan will be dealt with at the guru's own discretion.

As Gabrielle falls deeper and deeper under Aidan's spell, Xena becomes ever more restless and suspicious of the bald teacher. Sensing danger, Aidan cleverly uses Xena's greatest weakness against her: Gabrielle. With extended psychological knowledge and abilities to manipulate people's vision, Aidan tries to convince Xena that her dark side is too powerful and uncontrollable and in an environment of peace and harmony the warrior is certain to snap and may actually hurt her best friend. Astonishingly insecure about herself, Xena decides to leave Gabrielle with Aidan before anything horrible can happen. However, still trusting some of her instincts as well as her experience as a warlord, Xena notices something disturbing about the blue statues in the garden. They all wear badges identifying them as soldiers. Consequently, she seeks out Gar, a skittish and apparently quite mad little man, who seems to live in Aidan's pastoral scenery<sup>112</sup>:

Xena:            These statues were real men once. Your platoon. What happened to them?  
Gar:             Nothing. Aidan made sure of that. Nothing. That's what happened. But I knew, yeah, and I fought it.  
Xena:            You fought what?  
Gar:             Aidan. It's all him. He makes everyone so still. He leeches their goodness. Goodness. In a perfect place. Going to waste without evil to keep it alive and fighting.

Having thus discovered that Aidan has little interest in the people who seek his help other than using them for his own purposes, Xena sets out to save her friend who has already fallen into a deep trance. While Gabrielle, numb and unresponsive to her surroundings, is slowly turning into a blue statue, like so many before her, Xena activates her most dark and animalistic instincts in order to rescue her friend and making herself invulnerable to Aidan's attacks. Being forced to utilize that which she is most afraid of, Xena not only acknowledges the existence of a dark side being a part of her, but accepts these powers once again to save someone who is beyond helping herself. This battle with the slightly erratic, animalistic, dark Xena on the one and the smartly styled, yet truly evil Aidan on the other side, can be read as a struggle between wilderness and a decadent civilization in the sense of Turner's frontier thesis. Wilderness, here, stands for positive aspects such as truthfulness, resourcefulness, strength and determination, whereas civilization is presented as dull, weak, decadent and deceitful. Gabrielle represents the sad result of what happens if you stop relying on yourself and start trusting others to form your spirit for you. On the other hand, Xena symbolizes the successful American frontier spirit, where the reliance on

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<sup>112</sup> This slightly rabbit-like creature reminds the viewer once again of a Wonderland scenario, and thus emphasizing the supernatural environment of this episode.

one's own powers enables the powerful, individual American intellect to stand up against unhealthy and un-American influences from the outside. With respect to Jung's concept of the Self, and Campbell's notion of the archetypal hero, both protagonists have once more reached a stage of enlightenment in which they have learned something about themselves and the world. This knowledge brings them closer to their "true Self" by critically evaluating their role in the community. Furthermore, they can only be of use to the community, i.e., saving the soldiers who have been turned into statues, by finding strength in themselves.

Eventually defeating Aidan and his illusion of pastoral peace, Xena and Gabrielle find themselves back at the cave where the episode began. Aidan has been disclosed as a false prophet and both protagonists have taken another step closer to accepting themselves and each other:

Gabrielle: I sometimes talk about your darkness like it's some sort of disease.  
But without it, neither one of us would be here.

The episode "Paradise Found" can be interpreted on many different levels. One of the most interesting would be the supremacy of American values and the American character. The "other," coming from a different cultural background and trying to infuse Western-grown personalities with Eastern spiritualism, is shown certain skepticism, if not outright dismissal if they attempt to change Western lifestyles. Even though the message of this episode is not one of xenophobia, we can observe an underlying anxiety concerning spiritual teachings that diverge from traditional Christian and American values. Aidan does something unforgivable in restricting Xena and Gabrielle's physical and mental freedom. In the steadfast American character, according to Turner, "buoyancy and exuberance" (14) are a direct result of freedom. Taking away personal, physical and/or spiritual freedom from someone is an entirely un-American thing to do. Thus Aidan in "Paradise Found" stands for the threat of diluting the American character, of negating individualism and inhibiting individuation.

## 4.2 “Accepting Your Fate” – Buffy’s Fight for Self-Determination

If the protagonist of a story is a teenager, as in the case of Buffy Summers of the *BtVS* series, then storylines dealing with individuation, initiation and identity formation are practically a given. *BtVS* makes it easy for viewers to identify with the characters as the topics and figures are taken from the context of contemporary American society:

Buffy’s imagery is thus both shaped by and extends upon an existing cultural imaginary in which the viewers already participate. Buffy, as text, is thus easily accessible and may be read as linked to our culturally informed consciousness. Viewers may be said to share an internal connection to these metaphors. The series’ use of camp and self-reflexivity works similarly to ‘ground’ the viewer into the imaginary space of the text. (Heinecken 96-98)

If this average American teenager turns out to be a superhero with supernatural powers, the drama will increase exponentially. Buffy’s greatest struggle throughout the series is to reconcile her desire to be an average and “normal” girl, or young woman, with being the Slayer (cf. Brannon 4). Endowed with superpowers, chosen by fate, Buffy often feels very torn between two different lives. Thus, the problematic quest for self-identity makes Buffy an excellent model for identification for a large part of the show’s target group: teenage girls and young adult women.<sup>113</sup> Self-actualization, individuation and the search for the “Self” in *BtVS* are strongly associated with notions of initiation, individualism and the pursuit of personal happiness. In the following I will concentrate on the episodes “Anne” (3.01) and “Normal Again” (6.17)<sup>114</sup> of *BtVS* which center on Buffy’s efforts to harmonize her self-perception as a high school/college student with the superhero, happiness and friendship with responsibility.

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<sup>113</sup> As Buffy’s male friends, such as Xander or Oz, also go through the process of growing up and individuation, they offer points of identification for the male part of the audience.

<sup>114</sup> Neither of these episodes have been examined thoroughly in scholarship. Some texts mention “Normal Again”, for example, Heinecken or Len Geller in “‘Normal Again’ and ‘The Harvest’: The Subversion and Triumph of Realism in Buffy.” However, the episode is usually treated in other contexts which differ distinctly from the questions in this study.

**“Anne” (3.01)**

The narrative of the season premiere of *BtVS*'s third season begins with Buffy having left Sunnydale after the rather traumatic experience of slaying her vampire boyfriend Angel in order to save the world. Disillusioned by a world in which her responsibilities as the Slayer always seem to take precedence over her own personal happiness, Buffy flees to Los Angeles without notifying either family or friends. In L.A., Buffy works as a waitress in a greasy diner, trying to disappear in the drab dreariness of her work. She refrains from using her supernatural powers at all costs. Even when customers make lewd remarks and molest Buffy, she represses what the audience would commonly expect of her: the natural reaction to use the powers of the Slayer and teach them a lesson. To make a clean cut from her former life, Buffy is now using her middle name “Anne” instead of the name so closely connected to her life as a slayer. When she is recognized by Lily, a former high school student from Sunnydale, who turns to Buffy for help when Lily's boyfriend Ricky disappears, Buffy almost fearfully refrains from doing what she usually does best: helping those who cannot help themselves:

Lily: Can you help me?  
Buffy: Uh, I-I can't. (*walks away*)  
Lily: (*follows*) But... but that's who you are and stuff, right? I mean, you help people, and, you know...  
Buffy: I can't get into this. I'm sorry, Lily.  
Lily: You, you know how to do stuff.  
Buffy: I don't. (*exhales*) Not anymore.

Buffy is clearly doing her utmost to repress every part of herself that she associates with being the Slayer. Obviously, Buffy's fears of being emotionally hurt again as a consequence of dealing with the supernatural are exceptionally strong. At the same time, Buffy is quite aware of the futility of running away from her problems. When Ricky, the boyfriend, turns up dead under mysterious circumstances, Lily has trouble accepting the situation. In a voice bordering on aggression, Buffy explains to Lily with great insightfulness that to lie to oneself and pretend something bad did not happen, will not be successful in the long run:

Buffy: Lily, this is something you're just gonna have to deal with.  
Lily: (*flustered*) But he didn't do anything wrong! Why would this happen to him?  
Buffy: That's not the point. These things happen all the time. You can't just... close your eyes and hope that they're gonna go away.

Of course, closing her eyes and walking away is exactly what Buffy has done. And by explaining to Lily that such a course of action will not be beneficial, Buffy may be

consciously or unconsciously giving advice to herself. Unfortunately, we are not made aware of Buffy's thoughts, but we can observe her subsequent actions. After having so neatly laid down for Lily that one cannot simply ignore the bad things occurring around oneself, especially if there is a chance to do something about it, the meek Anne transforms back into Buffy.

At night, Buffy goes to a blood bank where Lily and Ricky had given blood in exchange for money. Breaking into an office and being surprised by a nurse, Buffy uses the opportunity to vent some of her resentments:

Nurse: You're getting yourself in a lot of trouble.  
Buffy: I don't want any trouble. I just want to be alone and quiet in a room with a chair and a fireplace and a tea cozy. I don't even know what a tea cozy is, but I want one. Instead, I keep getting trouble, which I am more than willing to share. (*with calm determination to the nurse*) What are you doing with these kids?

The Slayer seems to be back, however, not without regrets, as Buffy clarifies that instead of chasing after demons she would rather lead a less eventful life. Nevertheless, Buffy has accepted that if trouble comes her way she cannot simply ignore it, because she is one of the very few people in this world who might be able to do something about it. Her superpowers bring responsibilities as well and though she may try, ignoring these powers and responsibilities does not lead to a happier life. By acknowledging that Buffy and the Slayer are not two separate personalities, and that one cannot exist without the other, by embracing the whole of her, the woman and the mythological creature, Buffy grows on a spiritual level and becomes stronger than before. To act once more as a slayer is also to pronounce her individuality. Descending into mediocrity and hiding in a colorless body of worker drones can be read as distinctly un-American. Like Xena, Buffy too is a frontier spirit. Whether this frontier is geographical or spiritual in nature is irrelevant. A slayer, the only one chosen to defend humanity from demons and vampires, is as much living in a frontier situation as a pioneer traveling the uncivilized American West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, she can only find spiritual peace by keeping strong ties to her family and friends and being involved in the community, i.e., protecting mankind. Thus, only when Buffy acknowledges her individuality does she display the particular American traits of strength combined with a quick mind (cf. Turner 14), which makes her the superhero her society needs.

After talking to the nurse at the blood bank, Buffy ventures upon a group of demons kidnapping humans that will probably not be missed, and force them to work in an

underground facility which exists in a different dimension from our reality. In order to investigate, Buffy lets herself be captured and learns that Lily has been taken by the demons as well. Locked away in a dirty cell, Buffy is told by the leader of the demons that she has finally achieved her aim, and managed to completely disappear from the world she seems to despise so much:

Ken: I know you... *Anne*. So afraid. So pathetically determined to run away from whatever it is you used to be. (*Buffy looks away*) To disappear. Congratulations. (*Buffy looks at him again*) You got your wish.

Of course, at this point Buffy has already taken up the mantle of the Slayer again. Still, being reminded of her behavior of only a few days earlier, strengthens Buffy's determination to act as the Slayer once more and fight for the helpless. One of the first steps is to regain her true name and her calling. When a demon guard advises his prisoners that they are nobody, that they are worthless, and attempts to violently break the young people's spirit, we can observe Buffy's reconciliation of the woman and the Slayer as necessary components to complete herself as a person and individual:

Guard: Who are you?  
Aaron: (*afraid*) Aaron.  
(*The guard brutally hits the boy over the head with a club. The boy grunts in pain and falls to the floor. The guard advances to Lily.*)  
Guard: Who are you?  
Lily: (*whimpers*) No one.  
(*The guard continues to the next person.*)  
Guard: Who are you?  
Boy: (*fearfully*) No one.  
(*The guard reaches Buffy.*)  
Guard: Who are you?  
(*Buffy slowly looks up to the guard and then smiles.*)  
Buffy: (*friendly*) I'm Buffy. The Vampire Slayer. And you are...?

With that Buffy unleashes the Slayer with full force and proceeds to beat up the demons and free all their prisoners. At the end of the episode Buffy decides to return to her family and friends and her Slayer duties in Sunnydale. The Los Angeles hideout Buffy lived in over the past few weeks is handed down to Lily as her break into a new life. The most obvious message of the episode "Anne," i.e., running away from your problems will do you no good, is infused with discussions of individuation and individualism. Buffy's acceptance of her role as the Slayer is a step closer to her Self, i.e., inner peace, harmony and content. At the same time Buffy proves that self-reliance is necessary for growth as a person, and for placing herself within her immediate community.



**“Normal Again” (6.17)**

Towards the end of the sixth season of the series, the premise for “Normal Again” is quite different from the episode discussed above, yet the problem is rather similar, though perhaps more intense and grown-up than what we have seen before in the series. Issues of individuation in connection with adulthood are addressed and negotiated. Furthermore, the episode shrewdly questions the perception of fictional realities, as they are established in television shows, by its viewers. Geller has claimed that this particular episode “calls into question not just portions of the text but the entire text” (1). As “Normal Again” does not offer a resolution to this problem it holds a unique place in the *BtVS* narrative.

The season begins with Buffy having magically been brought back from the dead by her well-meaning friends. What Willow and the others could not have known is that Buffy, wherever she might have been, was happy and at peace. Now she has to readjust to a world which seems alien and hostile to her. Additionally, at 21 years of age, Buffy finds herself in the demanding situation of being an adult, responsible for her teenage sister Dawn, as well as being forced into the role of bread-winner and caretaker for her friends Willow and Tara who have moved in with Dawn during Buffy’s absence. Bills have stacked up and the task of earning money, along with the usual responsibilities as a slayer, once again rest heavily on Buffy. The further the season progresses, the more serious the problems become for Buffy. Her sister has begun shop-lifting to gain attention; her friend Willow abuses her magical powers, which results in the break-up of her relationship with her girlfriend Tara. Buffy’s friend Xander leaves his bride at the altar and all the while the Trio, a team of college boys who want to be supervillains, disturb life in Sunnydale with increasingly serious offenses.

Keeping all this in mind, the story of “Normal Again” begins when the Trio sets a demon on Buffy, who stabs her with a poisonous spike. The moment Buffy is hit she seems to be transported into a different world. We see Buffy in a hospital, obviously frightened and confused, cowering in the corner of a room. She asks a doctor what the meaning of all this is, and the answer she gets is as disturbing for Buffy as it is for the audience:

Doctor:	Do you know where you are, Buffy?
Buffy:	<i>(confused)</i> Sunnydale.
Doctor:	No, none of that's real. None of it. You're in a mental institution. <i>(Buffy frowns at the floor and shakes her head)</i> You've been with us now for six years. Do you remember?

All of the sudden, the continuing narrative centering on Sunnydale, the existence of the Slayer and a world in which demons and vampires are every-day occurrences, is broken

up. The audience is reminded of the fictionality of the Buffyverse, the characters and the events they have witnessed over the past six years. As the producers of this episode set up a different reality for Buffy, the viewers are left to wonder what the meaning of this surreal experience might be. If Buffy is indeed the Slayer, and the fictitious narrative accepted as the “true” one, then the mental institution must be seen as a poison-induced protective place into which Buffy is drawn when her life in Sunnydale becomes too difficult to handle. However, neither Buffy, nor the audience knows, which “reality” is delusional and which is not (cf. Geller 2).

In the hospital, Buffy’s mother Joyce and her father Hank are alive and well, and still together, whereas in Sunnydale Buffy’s parents have been divorced for years and Joyce has died recently. However, if reality means that Buffy is schizophrenic and has been treated in the mental institution for the past few years, the audience would have to adjust to a completely re-arranged narrative.<sup>115</sup> Meanwhile, the life of the Slayer is being deconstructed by the doctor in the mental institution:

- Joyce: Are you saying that Buffy could be like she was before any of this happened?
- Doctor: (*gets up, comes around the desk*) Mrs. Summers, you have to understand the severity of what’s happened to your daughter (*sits on the edge of his desk*). For the last six years, she’s been in an undifferentiated type of schizophrenia.
- Hank: We know what her condition is. (*Buffy frowning*) That’s not what we’re asking.
- Doctor: Buffy’s delusions are multi-layered. (*Joyce and Hank listening intently*) She believes she’s some type of hero.
- Joyce: The Slayer.
- Doctor: The Slayer, right, but that’s only one level. She’s also created an intricate latticework to support her primary delusion. In her mind, she’s the central figure in a fantastic world beyond imagination. (*Buffy staring into the distance, frowning*) She’s surrounded herself with friends, most with their own superpowers ... who are as real to her as you or me. More so, unfortunately. Together they face ... grand overblown conflicts against an assortment of monsters both imaginary and rooted in actual myth. Every time we think we’re getting through to her, more fanciful enemies magically appear.  
[...]
- Buffy: (*tearful*) Dawn?
- Hank: (*to doctor*) That’s the sister, right?

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<sup>115</sup> The possibility that the audience might be faced with such a radical re-adjustment does not seem entirely out of the question. At the beginning of the fifth season Buffy’s sister Dawn is suddenly part of the series. Neither the audience, nor the characters had ever seen the girl before. Still, all the characters in the show behaved as if Dawn had always been part of the narrative. Even though there is a subsequent explanation for the existence of Dawn, the audience was initially expected to adjust (which they did) to a substantial change of the fictional world of Sunnydale.

Doctor: A magical key. Buffy inserted Dawn into her delusion, actually rewriting the entire history of it to accommodate a need for a familial bond ... *(to Buffy)* Buffy, but that created inconsistencies, didn't it? *(Buffy staring at him)* Your sister, your friends, all of those people you created in Sunnydale, they aren't as comforting as they once were. Are they? They're coming apart.

Buffy, along with the audience, is torn between believing in a “normal” life, without vampires and demons, without the insurmountable problems she is constantly faced with in Sunnydale and with her parents to take care of her, and the narrated world they have known before. The confused young woman is forced to choose one, and only one, reality. The audience will then need to cope with that choice, one way or the other. There is the seemingly safe place, where Buffy's parents will take care of her and she can finally be “normal:” Buffy's greatest problem thus being solved. Alternatively, Buffy could accept Sunnydale, her friends and her responsibilities as her true home.

If Sunnydale was the “true” reality, then the mental institution could simply be read as a representation of Buffy's unconscious, where she struggles with having to accept who and what she is in order to return to her life and become a more satisfied and eventually happier person. But what if Sunnydale was indeed only a figment of Buffy's imagination? Then the whole narrative of the series so far would have been the illusions of a young woman unable to deal with the world, possibly prone to depression and/or anxiety disorders. The audience would lose their popular superhero and have to come to terms with Buffy being a person who could easily be a friend, a neighbor or a classmate, i.e., someone they may know in the “real world.”

The episode continues with Buffy switching back and forth between Sunnydale and the hospital. When Dawn, during one of her visits to Sunnydale, tearfully accuses that Buffy's “illusions” are probably her “ideal reality,” Buffy comes to a decision. The next time we see Buffy at the hospital her wish to live a “normal” life seems to have won the upper hand and she tells her parents and the doctors at the mental institute “I don't wanna go back there [to Sunnydale] ... I wanna be healthy again. *(Joyce smiles hopefully. Buffy turns to the doctor)* What do I have to do?” The doctors and her parents advise Buffy that she needs to separate herself from the things that keep her in Sunnydale, primarily, her friends. They are the ones who pulled her back when Buffy had returned to the “real” world the preceding summer. The doctor is, of course referring to the time, when Buffy was considered dead in the Sunnydale narrative and brought back with the help of a magical ritual by her friends. Of the time of her “death” Buffy only remembers feeling that she was “in heaven” (cf.

“Once More With Feeling” 6.07). Heaven at this point is equated with the “normal” world and being a “normal” woman. Believing that she will feel safe and happy again, once she leaves Sunnydale behind, Buffy decides on a severe course of action. When Buffy next returns to Sunnydale she overpowers her friends and her sister, takes them to the basement of her house and frees the demon that was held there in order to find an antidote for Buffy’s condition. Above, we have considered the mental institution as a personification of Buffy’s subconscious, provided the Sunnydale narrative is “true.” If we assume, along with Buffy, that the world of the hospital is “true,” then the basement in Buffy’s Sunnydale home is now the place of a struggle of her mind to regain control and find her “true Self.”

To watch her friends and her sister being attacked by the demon, and standing idly by while the others are about to die, is almost unbearable to Buffy. Hiding under the stairs leading to the basement Buffy becomes more and more agitated. As the Slayer it would be easy for Buffy to save the people she loves, but as a “normal” young woman there is nothing she can do. At this point Buffy has to re-examine the decision she has made before. Though the wish to be “normal” might have been one of the biggest issues throughout the previous narrative of Buffy’s life, she cannot deny the fundamental heroism inside her. In this struggle that seems to tear Buffy apart, her mother’s voice helps Buffy to, quite literally, make up her mind:

- Joyce: Buffy? Buffy! Buffy, fight it. You’re too good to give in, you can beat this thing. Be strong, baby, ok? (*Buffy is crying*) I know you’re afraid. I know the world feels like a hard place sometimes, but you’ve got people who love you. (*tearful*) Your dad and I, we have all the faith in the world in you. We’ll always be with you. (*Buffy calms down as these words start to sink in*)
- Joyce: You’ve got ... a world of strength in your heart. I know you do. You just have to find it again. (*whispering*) Believe in yourself. (*Joyce strokes her hair. Buffy sniffles, looks determined. Slowly she turns her head to look Joyce in the eye*)
- Buffy: You’re right. (*she smiles sadly*) Thank you. (*Joyce smiles*)
- Buffy: (*tearful*) Good-bye.

Buffy was created a hero and that is what she will stay. The fact that it is Buffy’s mother who helps Buffy to come to a decision about herself and her life in this situation is nothing but logical. One of the attractions of the “Buffyverse” is its infusion with elements of mythology and the supernatural. In mythology the mother figure is one of the most

powerful entities. A mother figure can appear as either loving or terrifying.<sup>116</sup> Joyce symbolizes the loving mother encompassing aspects such as:

die magische Autorität des Weiblichen; die Weisheit und die geistige Höhe jenseits des Verstandes; das Gütige, Hegende, Tragende, Wachstum-, Fruchtbarkeit- und Nahrungsspendende; die Stätte der magischen Verwandlung, der Wiedergeburt; der hilfreiche Instinkt oder Impuls (Jung, *Archetypen*, 80-81).

Buffy's mother is caring and nurturing when she tells Buffy that she and Hank believe in their daughter's strength; she acts wisely in recognizing that Buffy needs to make her own decision by not telling her what to do, but only to be strong in whatever action she decides to take; her knowledge lies outside rational science and it is Joyce who points her daughter towards a change that could even be interpreted as a the rebirth of the Slayer into the world of Sunnydale. That the father figure is mainly absent in both the Sunnydale narrative and in this decisive scene is once again evidence to the fact that *BtVS* is a series in which women are usually physically, intellectually and spiritually stronger than men. Patriarchy is not a dominating ideology in the "Buffyverse." Instead, Buffy's bonds to her female relations, i.e., her mother, her sister and Willow, are essential to making choices guiding her life.

With her mother pointing the way, Buffy returns to Sunnydale to face the bills, raise her teenage sister, care for her friends and protect society from all evil. Buffy has discovered that helping others, especially her friends, is not only a responsibility, but an essential necessity for her character. Realizing that her parents may love her but do not need her as the people in Sunnydale do, Buffy goes back to those who depend on her. Acknowledging those characteristics that complete her personality, Buffy leaves behind her yearning for normalcy and protection and accepts her responsibilities as an adult in a vastly complex society. As Buffy is not an ordinary young woman, but the Slayer, the courage to understand this part of herself as crucial allows Buffy to grow as a person and will ultimately contribute to her feeling more content in her life. We can also interpret Buffy's choice to return to Sunnydale as a victory for the individual. Instead of letting others decide for her, Buffy is determined to make her own way. In Buffy's choice lies proof that "individual freedom and responsibility are the most fundamental of American values" (Bobo 73, cf. McCloskey and Zaller).

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<sup>116</sup> For a more detailed description of the numerous characteristics of the mother archetype see Jung's book *Symbole der Wandlung*.

Nevertheless, all of the above is only true, if Sunnydale is the “real” world and the mental institution a hallucination. Buffy returning to Sunnydale, saving her friends and the world the audience has gotten used to, would bring this episode to a satisfying closure. However, the creators are not interested in leaving the viewers with a simple explanation and a heartfelt happy-ending. When the Slayer fights and defeats the demon, Buffy’s friend Willow tells her “everything’s gonna be okay, Buffy.” In a rather disturbing twist, this happy thought does not close the episode. While everything in Sunnydale seems to return to normal, the last scene of the episode once again shows a catatonic Buffy in the mental institution and the doctor explaining to Buffy’s dejected parents: “I’m afraid we lost her.”

Pure logic would dictate to believe that the hospital thus ultimately represents the “real” world. How could this part of the narrative continue, if Buffy’s true reality and true narrative was in Sunnydale? Geller explains that on the DVD commentary to this episode Diego Gutierrez, the writer, and Rick Rosenthal, the director discuss the unusual ending:

the final scene is included to reinforce uncertainty in the viewers. Its intent is not to settle the objectivity issue at all, which it does not do, but to dispel and offset any viewer inference that the penultimate scene confers ontological status on the Sunnydale world. It is there to remind us that though Buffy has made her choice and returned to Sunnydale as the Slayer, this reality may still be the imaginary construction of a catatonic young woman in a mental hospital [...] it is one more (though a radical one, to be sure) in a long and intricate series of moves by Whedon and his writers to create an open-ended and pluralistic reading of the text. (14)

So ultimately, it is up to the viewer to decide which reality and which narrative thread they choose to follow. In letting “Normal Again” end on such a confusing note, the creators break up conventional storytelling in order to raise the audience’s awareness of the artificiality of television narratives.

Both “Anne” and “Normal Again” have at their center a discussion about Buffy finding her true “Self.” In both episodes Buffy is frustrated, depressed and overwhelmed with the burdens of her fate as the Slayer, and the responsibilities as provider which her family and friends have placed on her. Buffy’s first reaction is to flee from troubles and strife and chose the easier way, the road “more traveled on.” Only when women close to her, Lily and her mother respectively, remind her of her purpose in life, of *what* she is, does Buffy begin to accept all the parts of her and combine them to the heroic person people, inside the narrative and in the audience, know her to be. Beginning to understand that she needs

to be both Buffy and the Slayer to make her the valuable individual that she is, and to rely on that individual, eventually allows Buffy to face life once more and become re-involved with her family and society. In contrast to many male hero figures, Buffy's decision-making processes are strongly influenced by her relationships to other people, especially women. In this, Heineken sees clear distinguishing elements between Buffy and traditional male-centered texts:

A guiding theme of Buffy is its focus on the consequences of action. Buffy, like male-centered texts, thus shows the subject's power to shape her world, yet the series' focus on consequences and the construction of an identity formed through a web of relations means that as Buffy acts, she is also acted upon. While male-centered texts construct a heroic subjectivity based on isolation and denial of the body, Buffy's emphasis on relationships and sensation creates a world in which subjectivity is formed through the sensation of existing within the material world and which is clearly formed in relation to that world. (129)

The processes of self-actualization and individuation are painful for Buffy, but eventually she is shown to come out a much stronger person, both in a mental, and in a physical sense.

### **4.3 “Discussing Your Destiny” – Sara Pezzini’s Search for the Meaning of Life**

Whereas the premise of both *XWP* and *BtVS* is a world in which gods, monster, demons and vampires are part of everyday life, the series *Witchblade*, set in New York City in the year 2000, appears to be closer to the reality of the audience than the other two shows. Homicide detective Sara Pezzini does not have any supernatural powers that would distinguish her from any other police officer, at least up to the point where the fantastic element, the magical artifact *Witchblade* is introduced to the narrative. With the arrival of the *Witchblade*, the world as Sara Pezzini has known it and the notion of her own place in that world, changes severely. The gradual disclosure of mythical features in an otherwise “normal” world adds to an easier acceptance of the narrative, as the viewer discovers the previously hidden mythological aspects that seem to be everywhere, together with Sara. Coinciding with the appearance of the *Witchblade* is the revelation within the personal background story of Sara that she was adopted. Not knowing her biological parents further adds to the alienation Sara feels, while at the same time fueling the interest of the audience. By obfuscating the origin of their hero the creators use a familiar element of the archetypal hero, starting off with a “child of destiny” (Campbell, *Hero* 326) who must go through many trials to reach her ordained place in this world. Now that Sara has thus been stripped of preconceived notions about herself and the world she is living in, she is challenged with finding her true Self. Part of this process of individuation can be observed very well in the episode “Periculum” (1.07). As the magical *Witchblade* is not simply an artifact to be used by its owner, but rather in itself an intelligent organism, it is able to put its wielder through a physical and spiritual trial, called the *Periculum*. Going through this test, Sara eventually begins to understand her ultimate and incomparable individuality (cf. Jung, *Beziehungen* 65), her Self. Having to extend her beliefs and trying to come to terms with her new perception of the world, Sara lives through a frontier experience. Sara’s place in the *Periculum* can be interpreted in the words of Turner that Sara’s environment “summons” her to “accept its conditions” (14). Sara draws from her previous knowledge, “the inherited ways of doing things,” but this new border which she needs to cross during the *Periculum* provides her eventually with “a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness and confidence” (ibid.).



**“Periculum” (1.07)**

Centering on Sara and the trial of the Witchblade, the episode opens with Sara being utterly distraught over the recent murder of her lover. The extremely strong connection of Sara’s lover, poet-singer Conchobar, and the detective is explained in the narrative as the continuation of a romantic affair between the (fictional) legendary Irish warrior queen Cathain, yet another wielder of the Witchblade, and the (fictional) Celtic hero Conchobar from a previous age (cf. “Sacrifice” 1.04). The loss of her lover, for Sara, is accompanied with a loss of control and a feeling of betrayal, since Conchobar was killed by a terrorist who was wearing the Witchblade at the time and used it to murder Conchobar. Sara’s grief is combined with a deep-set depression, fear and insecurity, concerning her own strength, the world around her, as well as the motives of the Witchblade.

In this physical and spiritual turmoil, the *Periculum*, the Latin word for “danger,” the test of the wielder’s worthiness begins. Resting on Sara’s wrist in the form of a small bracelet, the Witchblade starts to mysteriously sprout a number of thick tendrils, which tie Sara to her bed one morning and even cover her mouth so that she can neither move nor call for help. In this extremely vulnerable situation Sara is given a supernatural protector. Her former partner Danny Woo, who, after having been shot in the pilot film, has appeared as a ghost-like figure to Sara before, filling the role as guide or counselor to the spirit world, sits at Sara’s bed-side to watch over her during the trial. That the *Periculum* poses a very real threat to Sara’s life becomes obvious when Danny touches Sara’s hand and reveals:

Sara:	My hand. You’re ... you’re holding my hand.
Danny:	Does that bother you?
Sara:	Yeah, it bothers me. I haven’t been able to even touch you since ... you know.
Danny:	Since I died? ( <i>Sara nods.</i> )
Danny:	We can touch each other now, Sara, because you’re dying, too.

The audience realizes that if the Witchblade does not deem Sara worthy, she will most certainly lose her life.

At the beginning of the trial, the tendrils that hold Sara captive force her into a fetal position, indicating that a metaphorical rebirth is at hand. It is in this fetal position Sara transcends into a different world, possibly a dream state. Emphasizing the unique state of the dream world, everything which happens in this world is shot in black and white. The lack of colors suggests a time long ago or perhaps even the absence of time, and thus

achieves a stronger focus on symbolic images and dialogue. Both Sara's posture and clothes imply that she is standing at the beginning of a new life. Her clothes, a white, toga-like dress symbolize the purity and innocence of a new-born child. The fetal position she is placed in emphasizes this impression even more. When a sword touches Sara's arm and awakens her, the camera reveals that the detective had been sleeping curled up between the bodies of dead men strewn over an extensive battlefield. Again imagery of resurrection is used. The person carrying that sword is the spitting image of Sara, except for her attire, which consists primarily of chain mail and plate. As the audience has been made aware that one of the previous wielders of the Witchblade was the famous Joan of Arc,<sup>117</sup> we know that this must be this famed warrior. However, Joan of Arc is identified not as a historical persona, part of lore and legends, but only as another version of Sara in another time:

Sara:           You're Joan of Arc, but you have my face.  
Joan:           Your heart as well, and your soul.

Thus Sara Pezzini is established both as part of a continual Western mythology, and a warrior in her own right. The plate armor of the Middle Ages might have changed into police badge, gun and a uniform, but the continuation of the heroic warrior figure is obvious. Consequently, the audience perceives Sara as a familiar figure on various levels: history, mythology and reality.

Joan explains to Sara that the trial of the Witchblade has begun and that she must answer a number of questions not only to prove herself, but to survive. Throughout time the Witchblade has chosen wielders when "dark forces reach a certain critical mass; the reverse is also true" (Joan of Arc). It is interesting that the Witchblade is revealed as neither good nor evil, as thus it falls to the wielder, the human factor, to decide in which way to utilize the power embedded in the artifact. Every wielder has had one particular mission to which she dedicated her life, e.g., fight against enslavement, invaders, genocide, etc. Sara must now acknowledge the threat to humankind she is faced within her time and what she is fighting for.

Joan:           So I ask you, what is your crisis, Sara? What is your battlefield?  
Sara:           The whole damn world. Kids murder each other at school, pregnant  
                  mothers shoot smack, the water is poisoned, the air is poisoned ...  
Joan:           Symptoms. Name the disease ... the root, the cause.

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<sup>117</sup> During the pilot episode of the series Sara visits Kenneth Irons mansion in which he has assembled paintings of a number of former wielders of the Witchblade, among them Joan of Arc, Cleopatra, and Boudica. The faces of the women in the painting closely resemble that of Sara.

Sara: You don't understand. The whole human race has gone insane.  
Joan: Well named.  
Sara: What? I ... I can't do anything about that.  
Joan: Insane, from the Latin "unclean." You are the cleansing, Sara. You will make them pure.

Sara's crisis seems familiar enough to the audience. There is nothing metaphysical or mythological about these problems. Taken straight from the news and everyday lives is the awareness of living in a world threatened by pollution and increasingly violent behavior of people. The writers of the episode put their fingers on dilemmas of contemporary American society which they assume the audience might be concerned about. It is interesting that Sara identifies the illness behind those symptoms as "insanity." Even though insanity may be the cause for many evils in the world, it cannot be held responsible. If a person is insane, he or she cannot be measured by laws that are governed by rational thought processes. Consequently, the writers giving voice to Sara refrain from any moral or ethical judgments and declare contemporary society as being in a state which cannot be explained or understood.

Back in Sara's apartment, we see the detective now completely wrapped in the Witchblade's tentacles, still forcibly kept in a fetal position. All of a sudden, the tendrils jerk Sara's limbs around so that she imitates the posture of Jesus on the cross. This impression of the crucified Savior is strengthened when another vine sprouts from the Witchblade, taking the shape of a crown of thorns on Sara's head.

Once again, the hero is connected to mythology, this time, Christian mythology. After having found out that she, Sara, has been chosen to "clean" this world, the idea of her being a savior figure finds expression in the comparison to Christ. Breaking with the traditional Christian narrative, however, the savior of the world is no longer a man and a preacher, but a woman who is a warrior. Still, like Christ, Sara needs to endure a trial to show her strength, her worthiness and her power. Using greenish lighting which allows for unusual shadows during the scene, the creators adopt technical strategies commonly used in horror films in order to create an atmosphere of alienation and fear.

In the dream world of the *Periculum* Sara next encounters the god-like Irish warrior-queen Cathain, who is visualized reminiscent of the Lady of the Lake from the Arthurian legends.<sup>118</sup> Before they meet, a short sequence of quickly cut images floods the viewer's

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<sup>118</sup> The goddess-queen Cathain is a fully fictional character created for the series. However, the imagery which is used may remind the audience of stories of the Lady of the Lake from Arthurian tales, providing heroic knights with a weapon to bring peace and justice to their country. Cathain first appeared in the episode

senses. On these pictures we glimpse impressions of the face of a masked figure screaming in agony, a group of men on horses, their animals reeling away in panic from a huge fire in the background, a group of masked men, judging from their uniform-like armor, warriors of some sort, spreading their arms in a welcoming, yet threatening gesture, then, a stone circle, reminiscent of Stonehenge, and a lunar eclipse.

Cathain is dressed in a romantically idealized, almost comic-book like, version of a Celtic Warrior Queen armor. Popular imagery of Celtic designs and symbols help the viewer to position the figure of Cathain in a spatial and temporal framework. Sara is still wearing the white dress in which she awoke in the dreamscape. Once again, the whiteness of the dress emphasizes her displacement in this world as a seeker of knowledge about herself. The wood suggests an area of the unknown onto which unconscious content can be projected (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 79). In terms of Campbell's archetypal hero, Sara has reached a threshold that she needs to pass in order to gain enlightenment.

One of the greatest taboos in most contemporary Western societies is the topic of death. American culture and society is known for their idolization of youth.<sup>119</sup> Aging and death are themes which are avoided and the wish for eternal youth or even eternal life has brought people to using cryo-technology to preserve their bodies before death in the hope of waking up in a world where their particular ailment can be healed and they will be able to live a full life once more. Where for thousands of years humans have structured their lives around the cycle of life, death and rebirth, today's society would now prefer to dispose of death altogether. Thus, modern American society is in the process of developing a lifestyle in which death is no longer a part of life, but rather is seen as an evil monster to be feared and shunned. In *WB* the necessity of death as the only way of renewal and progress is suggested to the audience of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At first, when Sara meets Cathain, she is confronted with the pain she has felt over the loss of her lover Conchobar. This grief is so severe that Sara initially withdraws from society and becomes unable to live with

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"Sacrifice" (1.04) where the audience learns that Cathain, once a wielder of the Witchblade herself, was teacher and lover to the warrior Conchobar. The relationship of goddess-queen and warrior is mirrored in the romance of Sara and the poet-singer Conchobar and explains the instant attraction they have to each other. That the contemporary relationship of Sara and Conchobar is founded in and connected to the mythological one of Cathain and Conchobar is made clear through numerous flashbacks throughout the episodes "Sacrifice" (1.04), "Legion" (1.05), and "Maelstrom" (1.06).

<sup>119</sup> A 2003 comparison of American and German middle-aged and older adults showed that the discrepancy between actual age and "felt" age is much stronger in the United States than in a comparable Western European country. The desire to stay healthy and fit and thus identify oneself as "young" is especially noticeable in the United States. Cf. G. Westerhof, et. al. "Forever Young. A Comparison of Age Identities in the United States and Germany."

others or herself. As Cathain addresses Sara's fears, the goddess-warrior explains that the meaning of death for humankind has been twisted and encountering it should not distract Sara from her true purpose in life.

Cathain: Why are you crying?  
 Sara: Because death follows me.  
 Cathain: No, Sara, you are the one who follows death. It was your life's work before you even encountered the *lann*.<sup>120</sup> Remember?  
 Sara: But anyone who ever gets close to me dies.  
 Cathain: You think of death as evil, and evil as death. That is a falsehood.  
 Sara: You could have fooled me.  
 Cathain: What are you willing to sacrifice to achieve your destiny, Sara?  
 Sara: What destiny? OK. Something about returning sanity to the race, but ...  
 Cathain: Would you be willing to give up your life to achieve this goal?  
 Sara: Sure.

Celtic wisdom, represented by Cathain, introduces the viewer to a world which is closer to the cycles of nature, and in which death is not an unknown force to destroy a person, but a power which can be used for fighting a just cause. Sara is reminded of her destiny as a warrior for the people, and the audience is reminded of a different, ancient, acknowledgement of death as a balancing energy in this world. Reminding the audience that death is a necessary part of life brings back notions of the natural law of the frontier. Only by accepting the necessity to fight for freedom and the acceptance of death as a potential result of this fight, can a pioneer overcome the challenging wilderness of his/her environment.

Sara's final encounter with a previous wielder of the Witchblade is set in a vaguely modern-looking apartment. From the décor and air raid sirens wailing outside the viewer can easily determine that it must be the 1940s and World War II is raging throughout the world. In the apartment we can see a person in bed, and then a woman entering from a room, possibly the bathroom, buttoning her blouse. Any regular member of the audience will be able to identify that woman as Elizabeth Bronte,<sup>121</sup> Sara's grandmother and the last rightful wielder of the Blade before Sara herself. What the regular viewer will also surmise is that the person we have glimpsed in bed a few images earlier, is most likely a high-ranking Nazi, as it was disclosed that Elizabeth Bronte was a spy who had infiltrated the

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<sup>120</sup> Old Irish word for "blade," here with reference to the Witchblade.

<sup>121</sup> Though no connection to the Brontë sisters is ever mentioned in the series, the name Elizabeth Bronte invites an immediate association with the famous authors Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë, and their sister Elizabeth, who died at ten years of age. Consequently, the name Elizabeth Bronte could be interpreted to stand for a particular type of woman, i.e., romantic, imaginative and inquisitive. Furthermore, the name adds to the genealogy of formidable women who wielded the Witchblade before Sara.

Nazi regime and used her body to gain information from Nazi officials (cf. "Sacrifice" 1.04). Like Joan of Arc and Cathain, Elizabeth Bronte can be seen as a warrior in her own right, who had adapted to her times and her own mission in life to fight what popular culture knows to be an epitome of evil: Nazis. As Elizabeth and Sara face each other in the apartment, they seem to be standing in front of a (movie) screen on which images float by. These still images which provide the backdrop for Sara's third encounter are huge pictures of soldiers, fighting and dying, of tanks and planes. Off-screen sound provides distant machine-gun fire and the whistle of bombs being dropped from their carriers. Using still images instead of film sequences makes it easier for the viewer to observe the women in the foreground and at the same time take note of the images of pain and destruction in the background. Separating image and sound breaks up standard forms of filmic narration, creates a surreal atmosphere, and thus heightens the viewer's awareness for the story and the characters.

The dialogue ensuing between Sara and Elizabeth brings back the idea of the non-linearity of time and the unity of the wielders:

Elizabeth: I am not from your past, Sara, nor you from my future. Both of our lifetimes exist right now.  
Sara: So, I'm not your reincarnation ... I'm you.  
Elizabeth: As I am you. And we are each of the other wielders. Remember this and use it.

Reminding Sara, and the viewer, that all wielders are one and exist at the same time, deepens the notion of a historical and mythological interconnection which is signified by the contemporary wielder of the Witchblade, Sara Pezzini. Having achieved this, the conversation returns once more to the presumed dichotomy of life and death. At this point Sara has to make the choice whether to give up and die or return to her life and continue fighting the insanity of the world. For this sequence the image of the background switches to a military cemetery. Long lines of crosses stretching all the way to the horizon can be seen, symbolizing the imminent possibility of death. This is followed by a fleeting picture of a soldier on a battlefield, looking fearfully into the camera, which represents Sara's fear at this instant. Right after, we are back at the apartment again.

Sara: Are we alive or dead?  
Elizabeth: Oh, Sara, we have died a thousand times and are born a thousand and one. If I were to answer your question right now and tell you, "Yes, you are dead," how would you feel?  
Sara: Released ... from the load I walk around with all the time.  
Elizabeth: The load of what?  
Sara: Fear. It's fear.

Elizabeth: What else would you feel?  
Sara: Disappointed. Because there's so much I still want to do. I haven't finished yet.  
Sara (*experiencing an epiphany*): I haven't finished yet.  
Elizabeth: Today, Sara Pezzini, you have become a true warrior. Walk forward in your truth. Trust the Witchblade ... and when it guides you, follow.

After Elizabeth has delivered these last few lines, the famous image of soldiers raising the flag, announcing American victory on the battlefield of Iwo Jima appears on the background screen. Eventually, the two women in the foreground dissolve; the picture now fills the screen and slowly turns from black and white to color. At this point the accompanying music, violins and other orchestra instruments, which has softly been playing in the background, is raised in volume. The impression the music gives is that of a puzzle solved or a decision finally made. By using the picture of the Iwo Jima flag, the creators emphasize the turning point in the series' narrative. The choice of that particular image establishes Sara Pezzini as a truly American hero who has chosen to fight in and for American society and culture. At the same time the use of popular imagery either taken from real life, military films and documentaries or photographs are testament to the fact that the Second World War is a firm part of American self-identity and even part of a very particular American mythology.

After having set up Sara as an American hero, heavily saturated with Western mythology,<sup>122</sup> her humanity is reaffirmed when Sara asks Elizabeth Bronte whether she has failed or passed the *Periculum*:

Elizabeth: What do you think?  
Sara: I don't know. I don't feel worthy. I haven't given any brilliant answers.  
Elizabeth: There are no brilliant answers to the riddles of the *Periculum*, only true ones. You said, "I don't know." That was the true answer.

Not knowing all the answers to life and not feeling very heroic at all, confirms Sara as an average human being. This helps the viewer to better identify with the detective and acknowledge her as part of their own society and culture. However, the apparent normalcy and Sara's established heroic behavior put her into a tradition of the American pioneer, who uses his knowledge, skills and courage to civilize a world unknown.

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<sup>122</sup> Even though the image gallery of Irons shows wielders of the Witchblade in ancient Egypt (the wielder here is undoubtedly Cleopatra) or ancient Japan, this episode, as most of the others, focuses more strongly on Western mythology than any other.

What makes Sara special is first and foremost the Witchblade which, according to Elizabeth Bronte, is “a branch ripped from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.” Of course, with that explanation we are once again in the realm of Christian mythology, as the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” must be a reference to the tree which stood in the Garden of Eden and whose fruits were forbidden to Adam and Eve (cf. Gen. 2:17). However, the fall of men (and women) is not interpreted in the traditional theological fashion as the first sin for which all of mankind has to suffer ever after. Rather the advantages of knowledge and the ability to distinguish between good and evil are seen as powerful tools for the struggles of everyday life.

Having now passed the *Periculum* Sara wakes up in her own apartment with the Witchblade having returned to its passive form of a slim bracelet on her wrist. That the trial Sara had to endure was not simply a dream is evident by two small puncture marks on the inside of her wrist at the exact spots where the bracelet had physically locked onto Sara with its tendrils to tie her down. Sara’s mood is distinctly better than in the beginning of the episode where she had been grieving for Conchobar. She has faced death herself and has accepted it as just another state of being:

Danny:           You’re no longer dying.  
Sara:            You’re right, Danny, because I’m not afraid to. Not anymore.

The next scene shows Sara cleaning up herself and her apartment, listening to lively music. The choice of music seems slightly ironic, as we hear “Do you believe in Magic?” by *The Lovin’ Spoonful*.<sup>123</sup> Throughout the episode an atmosphere of the surreal and supernatural has been set up by the creators in order to draw their audience into a mythical world, only to now ask Sara and the viewers how much they are willing to believe and invest in what they have seen.

Just how much Sara’s experience has changed her life becomes apparent when her partner Jake McCartney visits the detective to cheer her up and is astonished when he sees her in a content, even cheerful mood:

Jake:            With everything you’ve been through, I expected you to be ...  
                      wasted.  
Sara:            I guess you could say I’ve ... uh ... come to terms with a few things.  
Jake:            Like what?  
Sara:            I don’t know. My purpose.

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<sup>123</sup> An interesting fact in the choice of music is not only the title of the song, but also that the drummer Joe Butler, one of the founding members of the band, is the father of Yancy Butler, who plays Sara Pezzini. We can assume that the writers of the episode are fully aware of this and thus create a connection between real life and the narrated story, which can be spotted by anyone with an extended knowledge of popular culture.



The angry, confused and grieving young woman that we saw in the beginning of the episode is gone and has been replaced by a strong, confident person at peace with the world and herself. This obvious contentment could only be achieved by Sara accepting herself as a warrior with a destiny. Reading the episode “Periculum” as a process of individuation, we can distinguish the different states and different topics that have been worked through. A naïve and childlike Sara meets Joan of Arc and discovers that life is not senseless, but that she has an ultimate goal in cleansing the world of insanity, which may seem overwhelming at first, but it gives Sara a purpose. Meeting Cathain, Sara vents her anger and grief over the loss of her lover. Life, death and love are perhaps three of the most difficult topics to deal with for every human being. However, realizing that death is an important part of life, Sara is eventually able to accept Conchobar’s death and her understanding of the world grows once more. Finally, meeting Elizabeth Bronte, a blood relative whom Sara has only seen on photographs before, helps Sara to realize that she may only be human, but at the same time the humanity of many women such as Joan of Arc, Cathain as well as her own grandmother, are gathered within her. Drawing from the strength and wisdom of all these women, Sara decides to return to life and live it to the best of her abilities. Women in *Witchblade* are a mixture of ancient mythology and postmodern lifestyles. On the one hand, the creators of the series evoke the wise old woman who attempts to heal the world. But on the other hand they connect ancient wisdom with a strong focus on the warrior woman.

Similarly to Buffy, Sara Pezzini demands agency, but makes her decisions informed by her relationships and experiences. What Heineken says about how Buffy constructs identity and in which respect this differs from traditional male hero figures, is equally true about Sara:

Buffy [or Sara] contrasts to male-centered texts in which the hero acts upon the world. Although his body is frequently acted upon by external forces, the hero’s ‘true self’ is shown as being located in the realm of mind and spirit and is untouchable. His subjectivity is closed, already formed, independent of the experience of his body or the world around him. In contrast, Buffy [and Sara], suggests the ways that identity is constructed through process, relationship, and the physical sensations and experiences, both positive and negative, of being in the world. (130-131)

In “Periculum” Sara’s mind and spirit are touched and she herself is ultimately changed through the experiences she makes in this trial. Again, very much like Buffy, Sara is created as a thoroughly female hero. A long line of fierce warrior women is part of her existence, and only the very fact that she is a woman gives her the power to be a superhero and enables her to wield the Witchblade. The most crucial decision of her life is made through guidance from and negotiation with other women. Even though fighting women are rather exceptional in Western storytelling, the *Witchblade* creators infuse these fictional women, who are often based on historical figures, with more power than they have ever been given and transfer this power to a modern young woman. Thus, gender performance in *WB* is constructed in close relation to Judith Butler’s notion that gender is “constantly in the process of being remade” (*Undoing Gender* 10). Eventually, through her encounters with her mythological “ancestors,” Sara is able to find her true Self and acknowledge the significance of her own individuality.

## Conclusion

The protagonists of *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB* face numerous trials to make this world a better place. In doing so, they are challenged to find their “true selves” and to accept and live with themselves in their immediate community and society. As was already discussed above, the contemporary hero figure in television drama is often highly complex. This complexity eventually adds to the verisimilitude of the person which the audience is invited to observe, or even to identify with:

Many series ... go to great lengths to explore the character’s past and to underline the continuity of the series by means of references to events and characters from earlier episodes ... they may also be the basis of a more thorough exploration of a character’s psychology because invoking their past often lends the characters an additional degree of authenticity, turning them potentially into ‘rounder’ characters. (Allrath/Gymlich 29)

Exploring the character in the sense of watching the heroes struggle with personal and social problems strengthens the connection between the protagonists and their audiences. As most of the immediate struggles depicted on these television shows can easily be followed in contemporary society, e.g., running away from problems, being afraid to stand up for yourself, etc., the viewers are helped along if they wish to engage with the show and consider their own behavior structures in the light of the potential solutions and models offered to them in the television series.

While observing the characters finding their “true selves,” the television shows are actively involved in negotiating a struggle between individualism and communitarianism. Xena, Buffy, and Sara Pezzini all display the particular American character trait of individualism. However, this individualism can only be lived in close connection with family and friends.<sup>124</sup> The protagonists solve their respective problems through self-reliance and courage. However, they fight monsters not only for their personal freedom, but for the good of the community as well. Sara Pezzini, for example, is highly invested in her job as a police officer. But her commitment is clearly not aimed at becoming more autonomous as an individual. Sara is obviously not on a quest “for the self, for leaving the past and the social structures that have previously enveloped us, for stripping off the obligations and restraints imposed by others” (Bellah, *Lecture*). Sara fights with, and sometimes even against, the Witchblade to help others. Similarly, Xena often cites a “greater good” for which she fights, and Buffy, as we have seen above, shares her superpowers with dozens of other women in order to make the world a safer place for humans. In individualism the process of social development begins. The frontier situation, living in a world with ghosts, monsters and demons, a more archaic world, brings out the best in a person and is unique to American society as “this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life ... with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (Turner 1-2). Ultimately, individualism in *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB* is not a method of isolating oneself from society, but instead a trait which makes it possible for the protagonists to become a valuable part of their community.

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<sup>124</sup> The friends of the protagonist, especially in *XWP* and *BtVS* act as a surrogate family and thus have unusually strong emotional attachments to each other.

## Chapter 5: Classic Myths and Archetypes and their Functions II: “And Justice for All” – The Hero's Nemesis and the Archetype of the Shadow

“Vigilante Justice? I don’t know.”

“It’s as American as apple pie.”

Pam Grier and Terry Carter in  
*Foxy Brown* (1974)

In order for a hero to be a hero he or she needs to have an adversary. The more evil the enemy is, the brighter the goodness of the hero can shine. If characters like *DC Comics*’s Joker or Lex Luthor threaten to destroy cities or the whole world, champions for mankind Batman and Superman are at their most dashing in foiling their opponent’s evil plans. Young Luke Skywalker, fighting against formidable Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* movies, then facing the evil Emperor Palpatine, and eventually liberating the entire universe from the dark side of the Force is a hero who has gone down in movie history. Often, the most prominent opponent of a hero is referred to as the hero’s “nemesis.”<sup>125</sup> In *BtVS*, *XWP* and *WB* we can find various types of these nemesis figures that are constructed not only to serve as particular challenges for the main protagonists. A more important purpose of these antagonist figures is that they can be used to discuss concepts of justice, retribution, forgiveness, etc. which are prevalent in a particular society at a particular time. The following chapter is concerned with selected nemesis figures from the three television shows which will be examined regarding their adaptation to fit a contemporary American context as well as their function in the negotiation of concepts of law and order and justice within a community.

When discussing a “nemesis” it is important to understand the meaning of the mythological origins of the figure of nemesis as well as to examine how this model has been adapted and perceived throughout the centuries, especially in American popular culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. One focus in my analysis will be the nemesis figure in connection with the archetype of the Shadow, which is usually referred to as repressed weaknesses of an individual and the projections of those shortcomings onto others.

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<sup>125</sup> At times, one hero can be assigned more than one nemesis, i.e., a variety of criminals have been called the nemesis to their respective comic book, television and film hero. Some of Batman’s nemesises would be, for example, the Joker (cf. Osborn), Two Face (cf. Lee, *Batman*), or Ra’s Al Ghul.

Thus, I will start this chapter by discussing notions of justice in the United States, before giving a short overview on the development of the concept of nemesis from its Greek and Roman origins to contemporary American culture. After that, the archetype of the Shadow as understood in psychoanalysis will be introduced, before putting both concepts, that of nemesis and that of the Shadow, into the context of the selected television shows and examining their functions in negotiation ideas of justice in contemporary American culture and society.

### **Justice and Vigilantism**

Tiffany Kristin Lee has claimed that “much of what people understand about the practice of law and law enforcement originates in television shows revolving around detectives and lawyers, many of which react to or comment on significant issues facing society” (1). Since crime shows are among the most popular genre on American television, any regular viewer may come to believe that he/she is fairly well informed on state and federal laws, law enforcement, police procedures, and so on. Of course, this presumed knowledge is only a fictional shadow of the real world, wrapped in shiny images to appeal to audiences. But whether the legal procedures are depicted correctly or not, has little impact on the fact that these shows are an excellent medium to discuss questions of justice and law in their contemporary society.

The United States’ legal system knows innumerable laws which state courts and federal courts, along with a multitude of other agencies seek to enforce and to uphold. But whether those laws are regarded as just or justified by the people is quite a different question. Justice is a dynamic concept, changing as often and to such an extent as the members of a group modify their perceptions of significant norms and values (cf. Flax 335).

In philosophy there has long existed a tradition which believed that “human behavior is partly motivated by a sense of justice” (Karni and Safra 263). From Plato’s *Republic*, to modern scholars, numerous definitions for “justice” have been offered. The general idea is that humans gain pleasure from “acting virtuously” (ibid.) and acting against social norms is detrimental to a person’s wellbeing. This concept has recently been discussed by evolutionary psychologists, who have applied game theory to examine moral sentiments in human behavior:

The hypothesis advanced by evolutionary psychologists is that many social interactions in our ancestral environment have attributes of nonzero sum games in which cooperation is beneficial to the organisms involved while noncooperative

behavior would be the equilibrium outcome of self-interest seeking players. Moral sentiments (such as outrage, vengefulness, and benevolence) evolved in this environment as means of enforcing cooperative behavior. (ibid. 264)<sup>126</sup>

Many psychologists support the idea that justice is conceptualized to regulate the behavior of members of a group:

On a collective level, justice is one way groups manage the strain of mediating between the individual subjectivities of which they are composed and objectivities such as limited resources, past traditions, and the consequences of past decisions and practices which those individuals did not create but to which they must respond. (Flax 341)

Aspects such as current political and cultural practices, education, economic status, ethnicity, gender and power relations all influence the development of subjectivity and justice (cf. ibid. 335). In any community or society rules for the most beneficial mode of behavior are created. If those rules are broken, then judgment and punishment is dealt out to the perpetrator. But finding a “just” judgment is not easy, as it entails a complex set of elements which must be taken into account:

Judgment involves a process of balancing and proportion, of evidence and reflection, of looking forward and backward. This requires the capacity to see things from the point of view of another and calls upon qualities like empathy and imagination as well as logic and objectivity. Judgment is also connected to action; we must evaluate the consequences of past decisions and place current potential within the context of the needs of both individuals and collectivities. Thus justice is dependent upon a quality of care that arises out of a sense of attachment, connectedness, and obligation to others. We must be able to imagine vividly the (potential) experiences of concrete others and yet sometimes distance ourselves from them, to think about the more abstract needs of the collectivity as a whole. (Flax 342)

However, the needs of the collective as a whole may not at all be very abstract. In recent years the United States has observed a rise in a particular form of justice: restorative justice. Here, the focus of criminal justice is drawn away from the offender, the one breaking the law, towards the harm the victim and/or the community have suffered (cf.

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<sup>126</sup> For a more detailed discussion and references see Daniel Dennett’s award winning book *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (1995).

Olson and Dzur 139). The aim in this type of criminal justice practice is to repair this harm to the victim, as it is “deemed more important than punishing the offender” (ibid. 142).

I would only partly agree with this last comment, as I believe that the punishment of the offender functions, in fact, as a crucial symbol of justice for the victim and its community. Examining the implementation of the death penalty in the United States, Zimring suggests in his *Cultural Contradictions of American Capital Punishment* that “capital punishment was given new life through its symbolic reconstruction as an acknowledgement of the victim’s rights and as a form of compensation for the loss suffered by the victim’s family” (Messer, Baumer and Rosenfeld 559-560). Furthermore Zimring believes that there is a long tradition of vigilante justice in America in which a harsh punishment serves as a communal ritual. This habit is born out of a “tradition of distrust of an excessively powerful government” (ibid. 560). Where citizens perceive the government as too far away to implement social control, the vigilante punishment is seen as an expression of “the will of the community rather than the power of a distant and alien government” (Zimring 89).

Modern, fictional superheroes in the United States often stand in this tradition of vigilante justice, as they are used to discuss the relationship between law and justice:

While the legal system is rarely mentioned, implicitly law is dealt with [...] through the notion of justice. Often there is a certain ambivalence around superheroes where they have to learn to work within some kind of moral system, discover some ‘objective’ social system of justice and hence ‘invent’ an idea of natural law for themselves. (Bainbridge 460)

This “natural law” is not easy to define, and the modern American superhero, strongly involved in his or her society, must search for a balance between the “mundane” and the “supernatural” life and make difficult decisions:

The American superhero of necessity possesses a dual personality: one, like Clark Kent that fits, or tries to fit, invisibly into the ordinary fabric of society; another, like Superman, whose reserves of power place him far beyond mortal men. This duality is a response to an underlying, and unresolved dualism in the society in which these heroes uncomfortably fit. The work-day identity accepts the ability of ordinary authority and enforcement structures to identify and contain undesirable elements, such as criminals. The secret identity, however, tacitly acknowledges the limitations of those structures when confronted with the darker motives of human beings. (McClelland 1).

*XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB* all put their superhero protagonists in situations where they have to decide whether to adhere to the governmental systems of law and order as they appear in their respective community, or to take matters into their own hands, thereby providing satisfaction to the perceived “will” of society. In the following chapter, I would like to present a few of these situations in each of the three television shows, and examine how the heroes are used to discuss notions of law and justice in contemporary society.

### **The Mythological Origins of Nemesis and the Development of the Concept**

The meaning and understanding of the figure of nemesis have gone through numerous changes in the past two millennia. Most important for this study are the notions of nemesis in the original context of Greek mythology and the shifted implications in American popular culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore I would like to provide a short introduction of those two ideas, separated by almost 2000 years.

As the personification of an abstract idea, Nemesis entered the Olympian Pantheon as a goddess closely connected to site of Rhamnous, where the most important sanctuary for Nemesis had been erected. In Greek mythology Nemesis was the goddess of just punishment or retribution, with an eye on balance and equality. Her name means “she who distributes or deals out” (Atsma). It comes from the Greek words *nemêsis* and *nêmo*, meaning to allot or distribute (cf. Hornum 6). Greek gods generally are depicted with unique symbols or characteristics through which they could be recognized in the particular cultural environment. Nemesis is often shown as a winged goddess, holding a sword, but also scales, a balance or a measuring rod. She has also been illustrated with an apple-branch and reigns or a lash (Hornum 11-37, cf. also Greene). What is important to remember though, is that Nemesis’s primary function was to make sure that everyone was treated equally: “Happiness and unhappiness were measured out by her, care being taken that happiness was not too frequent or too excessive” (ibid.). Researchers assume that the original idea behind Nemesis might have been “an apprehension by the Greeks of the power expressed in Indignation, divine or human” (Hornum 9). However, already in the works of famous scholars like Plato or Aristotle can we observe a change within this concept of the divine. The Greek authors interpreted the function of Nemesis much closer to our contemporary understanding of nemesis: “Nemesis, seen in this context, is not so



much an embodiment of indignation at moral wrongs, or a restraint on human impropriety, but rather a frightful being who can snatch away any success or good fortune a human being has obtained” (ibid.). This reading of nemesis finds resonance in the fact that in Roman times the cult of Nemesis was almost exclusively associated with the Roman games; her shrines were found at theaters, amphitheaters and stadia (cf. ibid. 43-56). Worshippers of Nemesis could often be found among the gladiators and other competitors in games of sports, hunt or battle (cf. ibid. 70-88). Since the time of the ancient Greeks and the Roman cult of Nemesis,<sup>127</sup> the meaning of the term has changed quite drastically.

The more one tries to trace the term *nemesis* in the 20th century and the early 21st century, the more varied are the contexts in which this expression is used. It can be found in scholarly articles concerned with literature, medicine, psychoanalysis, etc., as well as in fiction and popular culture.<sup>128</sup> The meaning however does not vary that much. The *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary* defines Nemesis as either a) one that inflicts retribution or vengeance, or b) a formidable and usually victorious rival or opponent. This second meaning of Nemesis is the one for which we can find most references, particularly in literary and medical texts. However, there are other components which have manifested themselves, especially when it comes to the world of popular culture. Here, a nemesis is often not simply a formidable rival, but he or she is usually very familiar and very closely connected to the hero, at times, even intimately so. For example, the tenth installment of the *Star Trek* films is titled *Star Trek: Nemesis* (2002). Aside from a large number of Romulans, Remans and other distractions the heroes of the *Starfleet* have to deal with, they have to overcome one key enemy in this movie: Shinzon. A human, raised by the Romulans, turns out to be a clone of *Starfleet* hero Captain Jean Luc Picard. This clone has a genetic defect and needs the blood of Picard to repair himself. Moreover, Shinzon plans to destroy the earth to bring new glory to the Romulan Empire. Ignoring the fact that the movie does not represent one of the better chapters of *Trek* history, the idea behind this particular Nemesis figure is a very contemporary one, heavily influenced by psychology and psychoanalysis. Picard has to fight Shinzon, which basically means, Picard has to fight

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<sup>127</sup> Michael B. Hornum offers a good introduction into the Roman worship of Nemesis in his book *Nemesis, The Roman State, and the Games*.

<sup>128</sup> A quick search in the academic article database JADE procured more than 300 entries with the term “nemesis” in the title alone (search conducted on 24. Jan., 2009).

and overcome himself. This situation points directly at Jung's concept of "the Shadow". The Shadow archetype can be explained as representing "characteristics that we are not comfortable accepting in ourselves and can be either positive or negative" (Grey 305, cf. Jung, *Aion*, Harding). Psychoanalysis therefore believes that even if "our nemesis appears to be our counterpart, we will see that this enemy who appears external to us is really within us" (Grey 301). The evilness of the antagonist being a personified projection of some dark part within the hero, which the hero eventually has to face, has become a crucial part of the concept of nemesis in popular culture. And there is yet another transformation in the understanding of Nemesis which is a direct result of a postmodern construction of the hero figure. Not wanting to go into much detail, I would simply like to assert that contemporary heroes are oftentimes broken or troubled and much more complex than, e.g., the undisputed heroism of *Superman* in the 1950s. As much as the hero of today's fiction is hardly ever all good or all evil, so the character of a nemesis has become much less definitive. One example from the world of graphic novels would be the relationship of Batman and Catwoman. Catwoman has often been considered Batman's Nemesis (cf. Bainbridge). However, in 2003 Batman openly begins a romantic relationship with her. This also entails revealing his true identity as Bruce Wayne and showing her the location of the Batcave. Batman's sidekick Robin (Tim Drake) is rather displeased by his mentor's actions, but Batman explains his point of view to the reader:

If Tim has one character flaw, it's that he still sees the world in blacks and whites. Good and evil wear very different masks in his eyes. He's getting old enough to accept that there are 'grays' in every situation. We may not like them, but it's part of what we do. And my relationship with Catwoman is, at best, gray. So ... when Tim asked the obvious question, 'Do you trust her?' – I gave him the obvious answer. 'I wouldn't have told her I was Bruce Wayne unless I didn't'. (Loeb/Lee)

The changed perception of hero figures correlates directly to the modern construction of a hero's nemesis, which is typically complex and open to interpretation and negotiation. The classical figure of nemesis, a divine entity measuring out just punishment or retribution, has become secondary to the interpretation of the concept of nemesis in contemporary culture as the personification of the dark side of an individual's character within a troubled hero figure. As I already pointed out, nemesis today, is often associated with psychological

and psychoanalytical concepts, the most essential one being the archetype of the Shadow as developed by psychoanalyst C.G. Jung. As this particular archetype will be significant in the examination of the hero's nemesis, the following section will provide a short introduction to the concept of the Shadow.

### **The Archetype of the Shadow**

As mentioned above, the Shadow is considered that part of every person with which they are uncomfortable. According to C.G. Jung, the personality, or persona, of each individual is comprised of three main aspects: the ego, the conscious part of our being, the Shadow, chiefly unconscious, and the anima, or animus, again an unconscious element dependent on the particular gender of the individual (cf. Jung, *Aion*).<sup>129</sup> Among all the unconscious aspects of the human psyche the Shadow is perhaps the easiest to recognize and to experience (cf. *ibid.* 145). Though possibly quite uncomfortable when acknowledged, the Shadow cannot simply be defined as an inherently evil component of our nature, but that part of ourselves which is ruled by instincts: “Der Schatten ist in der Regel nur etwas Niedriges, Primitives, Unangepaßtes und Mißliches, und nicht absolut böse. Er enthält auch kindische oder primitive Eigenschaften, die in gewisser Weise die menschliche Existenz beleben und verschönern würden; aber man stößt sich an hergebrachten Regeln“ (Jacobi 114, cf. also Jung, *Psychology and Religion* 12).

The more a person matures and their consciousness expands, the more their Shadow grows as well. However, though the term “shadow” often carries distinctively negative connotations, we need to remember, that it is an essential part of an individual's personality: “der Schatten versinnbildlicht unseren ‘dunklen Bruder,’ der zwar unsichtbar, doch unzertrennlich zu uns, zu unserer Ganzheit gehört” (Jacobi 111). C.G. Jung himself once described the Shadow in a rather dramatic and quasi-mythological way as “your brother, your shadow, the imperfect being in you that follows after and does everything which you are loath to do, all the things you are too cowardly or too decent to do” (Jung, *Dream Analysis*, 76, qt. in Walker 35). It is remarkable that in rare instances the Shadow may not so much be the “dark brother,” but quite the contrary. If the ego of a person is perceived as negative, possessing unfavorable traits, the Shadow will most likely contain

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<sup>129</sup> For a more detailed description of the concept of the persona see, e.g., *The Portable Jung*, p.139-145, or *Archetypen*.

the repressed positive qualities of the personality (cf. Jung, *Aion* 145). On a larger scale the personal Shadow finds correspondence in the collective Shadow, which is part of every community and society as it emblemizes “gleichsam die ‘Rückseite’ des herrschenden Zeitgeistes, seinen verborgenen Gegensatz” (Jacobi 113). Representations of the collective Shadow can often be found in archetypal images such as the Devil, the Bad Guys, the Enemy, etc. (cf. Walker 34). This concept of a collective Shadow representing that which is *not* desired and accepted in a particular society is especially important when attempting to analyze values and norms in American culture at a specific time through the medium of television shows (cf. Hirsch and Newcombe, and Fiske, *Television*), as is the aim of this study.

The contents of our Shadow are by no means arbitrary. They are strongly influenced by a person’s community and society:

What goes into our shadow is determined largely by our culture and our parents, but can also be shaped by teachers, friends, clergy and the wider culture in which we are socialized. Not only do we learn proper behavior, but we also learn what is taboo – that which is ‘mean-spirited, shameful and sinful.’ (Zweig and Abrams xvii, qt. in Grey 304)

As we find our place in society, we make conscious decisions which types of behavior we adapt or repress in public. Repressed traits and behaviors usually do not stay hidden forever, but find expression in relationships with others:

Things that are not recognized as our own shadow qualities [...] are projected to another person; we either blame him, criticize him, or revenge ourselves upon him for them. Or, if the material is projected is not negative but positive, we admire him, love him, perhaps envy him, or possibly even hate him for having what we have not got. (Harding 75)

To give an example for strong emotional reactions to another person as an unconscious projection of characteristics in ourselves that we are unable to accept, let us take a famous tale from the Bible: the story of Cain and Abel. Both brothers bring a sacrifice before God, Cain, being a farmer, brings “some of the land’s produce,” Abel, a shepherd, selects “some of the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions” (*Genesis* 4: 3+4). The story continues with God accepting Abel’s sacrifice and rejecting Cain’s. When Cain complains, God says:

“Why are you furious? And why are you downcast? If you do right, won’t you be accepted? But if you do not right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must master it” (*Genesis* 4: 6+7). So, whether it is that Cain chooses not to give the best of his herd to God, or is not as happy a giver as his brother Abel, or simply because he has other motives concerning his sacrifice – we do not know which – God points toward a particular failure of Cain as the reason for not accepting his sacrifice. Now, instead of trying to figure out where he, Cain, might have done wrong, he kills his brother Abel in a fit of jealousy. Cain slaying Abel is a prime example of someone unable to deal with his own weaknesses and instead blaming another person, by projecting his own problems onto this other person and even going so far as to eliminate the hated object.

Coming to terms with one’s Shadow is a difficult and time-consuming process. Yet it is necessary to fully develop your own persona, and in the course of individuation, which was already discussed above, one step to become a better human being is the eventual facing of one’s own Shadow: “Denn erst wenn wir gelernt haben uns von unserem Schatten zu unterscheiden, indem wir seine Realität als einen Teil unseres Wesens erkannt und anerkannt haben und dieser Erkenntnis auch immer gewärtig bleiben, kann die Auseinandersetzung mit den übrigen Gegensatzpaaren der Psyche gelingen“ (Jacobi 115).

Contemporary psychoanalysis has us comprehend the Shadow as “the second manifestation of our ‘nemesis,’ the enemy who appears external to us, but is really within” (Grey 305). This unconscious projection of characteristics upon others will be part of the discussion in the following passages which will examine the understanding and the interpretation of the concept of nemesis in selected episodes of *BtVS*, *XWP* and *WB*.

## **5.1 Americanizing Nemesis: *Buffy, the Trio* and the Question of Law and Justice<sup>130</sup>**

In every season of *BtVS* a villain must be fought, i.e., every year Buffy is usually set against one key enemy who is built into the story arc and whom Buffy has to fight and overcome at the end of a season. Examples would be The Master of season one, an incredibly ancient and evil vampire, the goddess Glorificus of season five, who was cast out of her particular hell dimension and wants to get back, which would unfortunately result in the destruction of the whole universe, or season seven, where the primary enemy is the rather abstract “First Evil,” a power whose intention is to become corporeal and eventually rule the earth. While each of these key enemies can be seen as a nemesis-type character, it is one particular nemesis figure which I would like to examine more closely here. In the sixth season of the series the mythological motif of nemesis is introduced into the show and, interestingly enough, is represented by a team of three young men – “The Trio” – who declare themselves to be the “arch-nemesises” of the Slayer. The uniqueness of this particular configuration of nemesis lies in the fact that the boys consciously appropriate the part of the Slayer’s nemesis. They do so by drawing on models of villains (and a few heroes, too) which they find in American popular culture and continually fill the concept of nemesis with new meaning. The Trio are also unique in that they are thoroughly human who borrow their supernatural power to commit crimes and fight Buffy. Some critics have suggested that it is the Trio’s essential humanness which make them exceptionally challenging to Buffy, because the Slayer is chosen to protect mankind (cf. Hoffmann 18). I believe that forcing Buffy to face human enemies also emphasizes the banality of evil which we are often confronted with in contemporary society.

Beginning with a short introduction of the Trio, I would like to examine how they Americanize and personalize their interpretation of nemesis and relate this to Buffy, after which I will study Buffy’s reaction to the three boys and the ideas of justice which she applies when dealing with them.

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<sup>130</sup> A slightly modified and shorter version of this subchapter has been published in Anyiwo, U. Melissa and Szatek, Karoline. *Buffy conquers the academy: conference papers from the 2009/2010 Popular Culture/American Culture Associations* (2013).

### The Trio

Warren Mears, Jonathan Levinson and Andrew Wells (WJA hereafter) are three young men in their late teens or early twenties who know each other from high school and who spend time with each other mainly because of similar interests, e.g., science-fiction, fantasy, comic books, etc. They are introduced as a team in the episode “Flooded” (6.04). However, all three characters have been part of earlier *BtVS* episodes. Warren, Jonathan and Andrew, as well as Buffy and her friends, have gone to Sunnydale High, the local high school. Warren and Jonathan have interacted previously with Buffy on several occasions (cf. “Go Fish” 2.20; “Earshot” 3.18; “The Prom” 3.20; “Superstar” 4.20; “I Was Made To Love You” 5.15). Andrew and Buffy are connected through Andrew’s older brother Tucker, who used to be a classmate of Buffy’s (cf. “The Prom” 3.20). All three members of the Trio have a history of being bullied (cf. “Go Fish” 2.20), of being highly insecure (cf. “Earshot” 3.18; “I Was Made to Love You” 5.15), and of having very peculiar interests.

Warren Mears is a genius in robotics, mechanics and all sort of technical gadgets. In “I Was Made To Love You” (5.15), lonely college sophomore Warren builds a robot girlfriend for himself which he later cruelly and inconsiderately abandons for another romantic interest. Throughout the episode Warren is shown as cold-hearted, irresponsible and a liar. Warren is highly intelligent, but at the same time emotionally rather immature. He has a strong misogynistic, egocentric and narcissistic vein, but is intrinsically a coward and seeks to avoid responsibility for his actions. As the instigator and planer of the Trio, Warren quickly establishes himself as the leader of the team. Otherwise, he is responsible for their technical equipment and experimenting with fusing technology and magic.<sup>131</sup>

Jonathan Levinson is an old acquaintance of *BtVS* viewers as well. He is a recurring character who, like Warren, has been a fellow high school student of Buffy’s. Short of stature, Jonathan is often the boy who is picked on and humiliated by others.<sup>132</sup> Teenage angst even drives him to attempt suicide which Buffy is able to stop just in time (cf. “Earshot” 3.18). In spite of severe inferiority issues, Jonathan is a rather good natured and friendly person which shows, for example, when he happily presents Buffy with a *Class Protector Award* at the Sunnydale High Prom, one of the few times that Buffy’s service for

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<sup>131</sup> As for example in the episode “Gone,” (6.11) where Warren invents a functional “Invisibility Ray.”

<sup>132</sup> For example in “Go Fish” (2.20) Jonathan tries out for the school’s swim team and is repeatedly picked on and bullied by the team members to (successfully) prevent him from becoming part of the group.

society is openly rewarded (cf. “The Prom” 3.20). We learn that Jonathan becomes interested in magic and eventually evolves into a strong sorcerer when he alters reality in the episode “Superstar” (4.20), transforming himself into a James-Bond-like superman. His control of magic is inadequate, however, and Buffy has to save Jonathan and Sunnydale by breaking the spell. “Superstar” introduces several character traits of Jonathan which become important again in his time with the Trio. Perhaps the most outstanding of which is that he always wants to be someone he is not. Preferring to be a benevolent hero to the people, but failing, he quickly agrees to start a career as a villain when Warren suggests as much. Jonathan does not have a strong will of his own, but is prone to listening to those stronger than himself. He wants to be accepted as a valuable member of a group, be it in high school, with the Scoobies in “Superstar,” or as part of the Trio. He is the one to display mature tendencies, wanting to get out of the group when he realizes they have gone too far, and also accepting the necessity of paying for his crimes.

Andrew Wells has not appeared on *BtVS* before. However, as he is introduced, and generally referred to as “Tucker’s brother,” a regular viewer can place him as the younger brother of the boy who created a pack of hellhounds, attacking the Sunnydale High Prom at the end of season three.<sup>133</sup> Perhaps the most immature member of the Trio,<sup>134</sup> Andrew provides something of a link between Warren and Jonathan. If we put Warren at one end of a scale measuring the potential for evil among the members of the Trio and Jonathan at the other, Andrew would be the one constantly travelling between the two. Though Andrew is capable of great evil and develops into a faithful minion of Warren, whom he admires and on whom he has a crush, it often seems as if he does not actually realize the immorality of what he is doing. When Jonathan and Andrew are put in jail by Buffy towards the end of season six, Andrew is more concerned about whether his aunt will possibly bring over his Discman than thinking about why he is stuck in a cell (cf. “Villains” 6.20). Often functioning as a comic-relief type of character, Andrew is a crucial part of the Trio as he specializes in demon-summoning and control.

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<sup>133</sup> Originally the writers wanted the previously introduced character of Tucker to be part of the Trio. However, the executives could not come to an agreement with the actor playing the part and thus invented Tucker’s brother Andrew to join the Trio.

<sup>134</sup> Andrew expresses one of his greatest pleasures in being a supervillain in “Flooded” (6.04): “I still can’t believe it. We did it! We can do anything. We could stay up all night if we wanna.”



Warren, Jonathan and Andrew<sup>135</sup> start out their criminal career very unobtrusively, but with a “super cool mission statement” (Jonathan, “Flooded” 6.04), which is to take over Sunnydale. It is worth reviewing the dialogue concerning this mission statement as it shows us the general attitude of the young men at this point in the narrative. The setting is the basement of Warren’s house. The three boys, surrounded by appliances and storage space, are playing a board game. Judging by the expression on their faces, the game is rather unexciting. Suddenly, Warren speaks up:

Warren:           So ... you guys wanna team up and take over Sunnydale?  
                       *(Jonathan and Andrew, look at each other, then look back at Warren)*  
 Jonathan and  
 Andrew:           *(indifferently)* Ok.

This dialogue seems more like a suggestion to leave the boring board game in favor of a more interesting and potentially thrilling one.<sup>136</sup> And that is exactly what we are dealing with at the beginning of the sixth season: three kids playing a game.

After this decision, Warren, Jonathan and Andrew start calling themselves “the Trio.” This is not only meant to be a catchy name which is easy to remember, but it is the first step towards imagining themselves as nemesis figures: to have a name is to have significance. In the world of the Trio, which is filled with characters and narratives from science-fiction, or fantasy films, television shows, and literature, every named hero has a named antagonist: Superman and Lex Luthor, Batman and the Joker, Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, and so on. So when the Trio declare themselves to be Buffy’s arch-nemesises,<sup>137</sup> it is not surprising that they do not think so much of the Greek goddess of just punishment, but more of comic book villains.

It is interesting to note that this position of the Trio as nemesis is not recognized or acknowledged by Buffy or any third person, but that WJA go to great lengths to define and position themselves as master criminals aiming to be the most challenging adversary to the Slayer yet. One could therefore argue that, in their basic realization that if they try to be supervillains Buffy as the local superhero will eventually come after them, the Trio

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<sup>135</sup> Since throughout *BtVS* the three boys are only referred to by their first names I will do so in this study as well.

<sup>136</sup> Even though the audience is not informed about whether or not Warren has thought about “taking over Sunnydale,” it seems probable, since Warren is known to develop his plans meticulously and in great detail.

<sup>137</sup> In “Gone” 6.11. This scene will be discussed in more detailed in the next section.

unconsciously grants Buffy the status of *their* nemesis, instead of vice versa. How WJA understand nemesis in the context of American popular culture, and endeavor to shape their identity accordingly, will be examined in the following section.

### **How does the Trio understand nemesis?**

As pointed out above, the Trio have created a world for themselves which is governed by the laws of popular entertainment culture, taken from films, television shows, comic books and video games. They understand nemesis not in the classical, philosophical sense, but solely in a context of popular culture's superheroes and supervillains. The Trio themselves aspire to play a more active part in this complex world made up of dreams and reality, as they explain to a demon they summoned:

Demon:            You hired me to create chaos and carnage for you. Told me you were powerful men, commanding machines, magicks [sic], the demon realms below.  
Warren:           We are.  
Andrew:          Yuh-huh.  
Jonathan:        We're like, super villains.  
                      *(They all laugh dorky super-villain laughs)* ("Flooded" 6.04)

One question which never comes up is: why do WJA want to be supervillains and not superheroes? With the skills and abilities the Trio possess they could easily have become a team of heroes. I believe the reason lies in their experiences as social outsiders. Throughout high school WJA have been tormented by fellow students who were considered socially successful. As a villain, especially as a team, they feel powerful enough to get back at this society that has mistreated them. It is only logical that they assume the role of the villain because it seems more real and attainable than becoming heroes.<sup>138</sup> Of course, another point for being a supervillain might simply be that the Trio perceive this as being more fun, as they do not have to conform to societal norms and are free to do whatever they want. A closer examination of the reasons for the Trio's choices would be interesting and might lead to more insights into American popular youth culture.

The Trio shape their supervillains in styles they have learned from popular culture, especially film, television, and comic books. Establishing themselves as supervillains follows a logical rationale. In order to take over Sunnydale and to fully develop their

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<sup>138</sup> As mentioned above, Jonathan actually tried to be a "Superstar" (4.20) once. However, this attempt at being a hero ended with Buffy and her friends having to save him and the rest of the world. At the end of the episode, Jonathan is humiliated and as lonely as before.

capacities, WJA need money. Money will help them not only to acquire the necessary tools, e.g., weapons, etc., but to create a lair, a safe haven to work on their evil schemes. If we look at examples from film and comic books we quickly realize that villains like Ernst Stavro Blofeld, from the *James Bond* movies or Lex Luthor from the *DC* comics each have their own special place from which they set out to take over the world. The first villainous action of WJA is to summon a mercenary demon to help them rob a bank. With the money from the robbery, they then set up a lair.

The Trio's lair is a testament to their nerdiness, playfulness and immaturity. Instead of relocating to a larger space, such as a house or mansion, the Trio's lair is still situated in the basement of the house where Warren lives with his mom. This is as much a matter of safety as of convenience. In the basement they have always been safe from people who would bully or humiliate them. It is the place where they were free to dream and to fantasize in the past, and as they are continually dreaming up their lives of supervillains, this is their ideal environment.<sup>139</sup> It is probably also the place where they can get sodas and sandwiches from Warren's mom, so they simply stay put.

Where the basement used to be filled with gardening tools and appliances, the Trio now transform this space into a room in which their fantasies can come true. They put soft carpets on the cold concrete and exchange their old beanbags with office leather chairs. The windows have colorful curtains (which are closed), and there are several shelves and glass cases filled with CDs and action figures. Where the gardening tools used to be, we can now see three brand new bicycles, even though it is doubtful that those will ever be used by the Trio. Computers and other electronic gadgets are blinking away and empty action figure boxes still litter the floor. In the middle of the room the boys have somehow managed to install an old Russian periscope which allows them to watch the garden upstairs. The image they receive on a huge flat-screen TV set in their lair thus shows Warren's mom weeding the tulips and later stretching out on a garden lounger sunbathing. For supervillains this lair is strangely lacking any sign of weaponry, except for a big flame thrower which apparently belongs to Warren. Instead we simply see three nerds acquiring status symbols such as games, action figures, television sets with huge speakers, and creating a comfortable environment for themselves. Their immediate goals to start them off on their criminal career also seem far from being wicked. A white board in their lair lists

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<sup>139</sup> Later Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew also obtain a van in which they set up all sorts of surveillance equipment. This vehicle becomes a mobile extension of the Trio's lair.

the Trio's steps – presumably – to “take over Sunnydale”: “Control the Weather, Miniaturize Fort Knox, Conjure Fake I.D.s, Shrink Ray, Girls, Girls, The Gorilla Thing” (“Flooded” 6.04). Aside from the rather ambitious plans to control the weather and miniaturize Fort Knox (possibly in connection to the Shrink Ray), the proposal to obtain fake I.D.s and to meet girls sounds more like Warren, Jonathan and Andrew are trying to make up for something they did not have the opportunity, and/or courage, to do before. They want to be the “cool” kids for once and do what their school mates have probably done since seventh or eighth grade. What this “strategy” also shows is the arbitrariness of the Trio's plans, along with an acute lack of true malice.

How much the Trio style their understanding of nemesis on a frame of American popular culture is not only evident in their behavior, but also in the language they use. To Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew being a supervillain means using a particular supervillain lingo. There are several linguistic queues which the Trio uses to style themselves as villains, for example, using a “typical” supervillain laugh “mwahahaha” or fashioning a “lair” for themselves. But also in their conversations do we find confirmation of the influence of popular culture which the boys have appropriated for themselves. When the demon the Trio has summoned to help them rob the bank demands the Slayer's head as payment for services rendered, Andrew and Jonathan refuse to kill Buffy.<sup>140</sup> The Trio take a vote on this topic, by raising their hands in the traditional Vulcan gesture of greeting known from *Star Trek*. However, in order to get rid of the demon, Warren gives him Buffy's address and whispers “You wanna kill her? Make it so” (“Flooded” 6.04). The phrase “make it so,” has become iconic in popular culture since it has been used regularly by Captain Jean Luc Picard on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Jonathan and Andrew who could not overhear the previous conversation express their amazement at the events:

Jonathan: (*amazed*): How'd you make him do that?  
Andrew: What are you? Some kind of Jedi?  
Warren: (*casually*): The Force can sometimes have great power on the weak-minded. (*Andrew and Jonathan nod and go “hmm” in awe*).

The Trio's language is full of references to shows and films like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, which emphasizes not only that the Trio use these texts to successfully communicate with

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<sup>140</sup> In this situation it is very obvious that Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew are not friends. When the demon threatens to kill the leader of the three boys, Warren and Andrew quickly point at Jonathan and giggle when the demon physically attacks Jonathan. Only when the demon declares that Jonathan is only the first to die after which he will turn to the others as well, does Warren stop the demon. However, his aim is not so much to help Jonathan, but to save his own life.

each other, but also demonstrates how much their behavior and language is styled after those fictional worlds and the deep meaning they invest in those texts of popular culture. It is interesting to note that the boys themselves do not seem to realize how casually they integrate fictional narratives and language into their own lives. A little later in the episode, Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew have the following conversation:

Andrew: Is this the life or what?  
Warren: (*agreeing*) Mm.  
Andrew: I mean, here we got all the stuff we ever wanted. And we didn't even have to ...  
Warren: Earn it?  
Andrew: (*smiling*) Exatamundo.  
Jonathan: It's true my friends. The way I see it ... life is like an interstellar journey. Some people go into hypersleep and travel at sub-light speeds... (*Warren and Jonathan nod in agreement*) ...only to get where they're going after years of struggle, toil and hard, hard work. We, on the other hand ...  
Andrew: Blast through the space-time continuum in a wormhole?  
(*they all nod and smile happily*)  
Jonathan: Gentlemen ... crime is our wormhole.  
Andrew: (*hesitantly*) But everyone knows if the width of a wormhole cavity is a whole number of wavelengths, plus a fraction of that wavelength, the coinciding particle activity collapses the infrastructure.  
(*Warren, wearing a virtual-reality headset that covers the top half of his face turns to Andrew*)  
Warren: Dude. Don't be a geek.

This example shows that any questioning of their rationale, as warped as it may sound, has no place in the world which the Trio create for themselves. It also is a playful nod of the creators to the large number of viewers who actually understand every word Warren, Jonathan and Andrew are saying. The simplicity to identify with one or all of the boys, to the average viewer, is higher than with any other nemesis figure on *BtVS* previously seen.

Once the Trio have established a name, a lair and a certain amount of confidence, they know that being a criminal (and using magic) in Sunnydale will invariably lead to an encounter with the Slayer. Warren, Jonathan and Andrew welcome this threat as a confirmation for their own significance. Their own importance as supervillains will only be fully reached when the local superhero, Buffy, takes note of them as a threat:

Jonathan: What are we gonna do about Buffy? You know sooner or later, the Slayer's gotta come after us.  
Andrew: Bring her on.  
Warren: We could, uh, we could hypnotize her.  
Andrew: Make her our willing sex bunny.  
(*They all laugh dorky laughs*)

At this stage the Trio see the Slayer as a potential threat, but not one to be concerned about too much. Exited by their first successful crime, underestimating Buffy is yet another sign for the game-like and highly unrealistic nature of the picture they have of themselves. However, the further the season progresses, the more obsessed the boys, and especially Warren who functions as the Trio's leader,<sup>141</sup> become with the Slayer, interpreting their own fear of Buffy as a growing threat issued by the Slayer. Eventually, in the episode "Gone" (6.11), the Trio identify themselves as Buffy's worst enemy and nemesis:

Buffy:	So you three have, what, banded together to be pains in my ass?
Warren:	( <i>Walking sideways with the other two following him</i> ) We're your arch-nemesises ... ses. ( <i>Buffy and Willow look confused</i> ) You may have beaten us this time, Slayer, but next time ... um ... uh, next time...
Jonathan:	Maybe not!

This is the point where the Trio actually meet reality and do not recognize it. Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew have a completely distorted view of their own significance and effectiveness as "supervillains," whereas Buffy is simply confused as to what it is they want. To Buffy, the Trio are just three guys she vaguely remembers from high school, who have, as usual, played with some gadget<sup>142</sup> that turned out to be dangerous. For the Trio, the Slayer clearly is their nemesis. And even though they continue to invent themselves as master criminals and the most challenging adversary to the Slayer, they never reach this desired aim.

Being obsessed by a perceived arch-enemy is also common in entertainment culture. However, a nemesis figure becomes truly interesting only when he/she is a recurring character and provides excitement in the continuing narrative.<sup>143</sup> Therefore, as we have seen above, the Trio is not disheartened by having to accept that the Slayer has beaten them in one particular challenge: they will always try again. As already seen in the episode "Flooded" 6.04, when yet another opportunity to kill the Slayer arises, Jonathan and Andrew are so determined to save Buffy that they even convince a reluctant Warren to help their former school mate:

Warren:	The Slayer got slammed with a big-ass dose of radiation when the gun overloaded. Her cells are mutating at an accelerated rate.
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<sup>141</sup> Warren becomes the leader of the Trio not necessarily because he is the oldest, but he is the most ruthless of the three and the only one to have a relatively clear notion of what being a criminal mastermind means.

<sup>142</sup> In this case it was an "Invisible Ray" built by Warren, which would have killed Buffy eventually.

<sup>143</sup> Examples for the recurring and obsessive arch-enemy character opposing a heroic figure are easy to find in American popular culture, e.g. Lex Luthor or the Joker from the *DC* comics, Blofeld from the *James Bond* movies, or Kahn Noonien Singh from the *Star Trek* universe.

Eventually her molecular makeup will start losing its integrity and then ... pfft. (*makes a "vanishing" gesture*)

Andrew: But, wouldn't that kill her?

Warren: Well, let me think. (*sarcastic*) Yeah!

Jonathan: Wait a minute! We're not killing anybody. Especially not Buffy!

Warren: (*sighs*) You guys are so immature! (*angrily*) We're villains! When are you gonna get that through your thick skulls?

Jonathan: We're not killers, we're crime lords!

Andrew: Yeah! Like, like Lex Luthor. (*gesturing with a comic book*) He's always trying to take over Metropolis, but he doesn't kill Superman!

Warren: Because it's Superman's book, you moron!<sup>144</sup>

Andrew: But Lex doesn't kill him, does he?  
(*Warren rolls his eyes in exasperation. Jonathan looks determined.*)

Jonathan: Listen, Warren ... (*points forcefully at the ray gun*) you get that ray working and the first thing we're gonna do is find Buffy and re-visible her before it's too late!  
(*Warren stands up and towers over Jonathan, both staring each other down.*)

Jonathan: You got me?

Warren: (*exasperatedly and giving up*) Fine! ("Gone" 6.11)

This insistence of wanting to be a supervillain on the one hand but not killing their most feared adversary illustrates the varying degrees of potential evil within the three boys as well as the seriousness each of the team bestows to this game of the Trio vs. Buffy. Whereas Jonathan and Andrew are quite happy to rob banks, build and use invisibility rays to spy on girls, etc., Warren does not have any qualms about killing people who stand between him and his plans. In the further course of the episode "Gone" (6.11), Warren pretends to "re-visible" Buffy, instead setting his invisibility-ray to total decomposition. He can only be stopped from killing the Slayer when he is pushed aside by Willow.

Observing Andrew's, and especially Jonathan's resolve to not hurt, let alone, kill Buffy, can be interpreted as part of the shadow-dynamics at work in the two boys in this situation. As stated above, the Shadow is not so much a strictly evil side of a person, as a repression of characteristics which are perceived as not wanted or accepted by a person's community. Jonathan and Andrew are trying very hard to be supervillains, and to please Warren, in the course of which they need to hold back any emotions which would be contrary to this goal. That this evil persona which Jonathan and Andrew try to create is only an act becomes

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<sup>144</sup> This explanation for the lack of success can of course also be applied to the Trio themselves on a meta-level. Because Buffy is the protagonist of the show, she will overcome the most evil and dangerous of enemies. Therefore, Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew do not have a chance to actually kill the Slayer.

clear when they defend Buffy over and over again.<sup>145</sup> Jonathan later even actively helps Buffy to overcome Warren.<sup>146</sup> The unconscious Shadow part in Jonathan is the place where he has stored his mild manners and initial goodness which he is unable to overcome no matter how much being a supervillain may attract him. Thus perceiving his own weaknesses Jonathan cannot help but admire and even like Buffy.

In Andrew and Jonathan we can also see that the Shadow can be playful and childish, but also very much creative (cf. Jung, *Aion*, 146). As long as taking over Sunnydale means that they do not have to consciously hurt anyone, both Jonathan and Andrew are extremely imaginative when the target is robbing a bank or spying on girls. In contrast to Warren, however, they do not possess the ruthlessness or the conviction of following through on a criminal career. Whereas Jonathan and Andrew are more interested in *playing* the takeover of Sunnydale, Warren is the only member of the Trio to truly develop into a villain. Consequently, the Slayer uses different strategies to deal with the various levels of good and evil that are existent in the Trio.

### Negotiations of Justice

Being a superhero in a world of vampires, demons and other evil creatures means having demanding, but at the same time rather straight-forward duties: a Slayer kills vampires. When something supernatural and evil comes around, Buffy eliminates it. Her destiny is to protect humans and to deal out a particular kind of justice which could not be handled by a regular “human” person without the powers that come with being a slayer. In the world of vampires and demons, the Slayer is the law. However, even in the “regular” world, where there are muggers and murderers, Buffy takes responsibility for the protection of innocents, and at the same time subjects herself to the laws governing society.<sup>147</sup> Two short examples will highlight the Slayer’s uncompromising code of conduct. In the episode “Smashed” (6.09) Buffy disrupts a mugging in progress which she initially assumes to be an attack of

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<sup>145</sup> Both in the episodes “Flooded” (6.04) and “Gone” (6.11), as mentioned above, Jonathan and Andrew refuse to kill Buffy, even when the opportunities are such that they would not even have to fight the Slayer themselves in order to eliminate her.

<sup>146</sup> This situation from the episode “Entropy” (6.18) is discussed below.

<sup>147</sup> Several articles have discussed concepts of law and justice in *BtVS*. Anthony Brady focuses on Buffy and Angel as executioner figures who have been chosen by powers beyond the American legal system to protect humans from vampires and demons. Tiffany Kristin Lee puts a focus on prosecutorial discretion in *BtVS*, and Bruce McClelland looks at the historical legitimization of violence from ancient Romanian legends of vampire killers to contemporary slayers.



vampires on humans. Her reaction is very cheerful at the prospect of not having to deal with vampires or demons for once “Usually it’s blood, and with the horror ... just a good old-fashioned mugging. (*the victims stare at her*) Kinda sweet actually.” She returns a stolen bag to the victims, before shooing them out of the way, and engaging the would-be criminals. Even though the muggers manage to escape, we can see that Buffy identifies herself as a force of justice in the world of demons and humans alike.<sup>148</sup> A second example of how strongly Buffy believes in the rules which society has created to deal with disruptions of peace we find in the episode “Dead Things” (6.13), when the Trio tricks the Slayer into believing she has killed a young woman. Shocked and determined, Buffy heads to the local police station to confess and face the consequences. The vampire Spike tries to convince Buffy not to turn herself in, reasoning that the death of the girl was an accident and that the Slayer stands outside the laws of society:

Spike: You are not throwing your life away over this.  
Buffy: It’s not your choice.  
Spike: Why are you doing this to yourself?  
Buffy: (*tearful*) A girl is dead because of me.  
Spike: And how many people are alive because of you? How many have you saved? One dead girl doesn’t tip the scale. (“Dead Things 6.13)

Even though Spike’s argument may have a certain logic to it, Buffy is not deterred from actively claiming what she accepts as just punishment at the hand of the local law enforcement. Only when she hears the name of the girl whose body has just been found, while waiting for a police officer to listen to her, she realizes that the young woman was Warren’s ex-girlfriend Katrina and assumes – quite correctly – that Warren probably had something to do with Katrina’s death. With this knowledge she exits the police station, returns to her friends and declares: “We need to find Warren, and the others. Whatever they’ve done, they’re not gonna get away with it” (*ibid.*)

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<sup>148</sup> Anthony Bradley has pointed out that Buffy and her friends have indeed respect for the justice system of their society, they simply do not acknowledge the “state law’s hegemony. State laws demand total and unquestioning obedience [...] Buffy and the Scooby Gang decide when state law’s writ will run and when they must intervene. From the moment in the second episode of the first season, ‘The Harvest’ (1.02), when Willow hacks into the city plans for Sunnydale, it is clear that they do not accept that they are the ‘servants’ of state law and that this law will not always bind them. The pursuit of vampires and demons regularly involves them in a range of activity, from trespass through theft to assault, which is contrary to the state law” (3). Having to operate outside the law, and even breaking it at times, is justified by a mission to protect humankind. This justification can also be connected to ideas of acceptable vigilantism in American popular culture.

The death of Katrina marks a change in the relationship between Buffy and the Trio, or perhaps better, Buffy and Warren. Whereas before Buffy saw the nerds as more of a nuisance but ultimately harmless,<sup>149</sup> she is now determined to bring a murderer to justice. Buffy has also realized that WJA are indeed a potential threat to society. When the Trio strikes next, Buffy and Warren fight once again. Buffy is only able to win this battle, because Jonathan has betrayed his team mate and informed Buffy that she needs to destroy two artifacts – magical orbs – which are giving Warren supernatural strength.

During the course of the fight we can see, how the shadow part of Warren's persona comes to the surface, for example through extremely vicious and misogynistic expressions:

Warren:           *(walking toward Buffy)* I was wondering when Super Bitch would show up.  
 Buffy:            You really got a problem with strong women, don't you?  
 Warren:           Nothing I can't handle. ("Entropy" 6.18)

As they engage in the skirmish, Warren's Shadow takes over completely. Buffy becomes the object onto which Warren projects his inferiority complex, his anxiety around and resentment of strong women. His fear of losing, of being humiliated, especially by a woman, and revenge for not being appreciated as an intelligent person but always slighted by society as a nerd, all come to the surface.

Warren:           You know who I am? Huh, Slayer?  
 Buffy:            You're a murderer.  
 Warren:           Well, that too, but more to the point.  
                      *(Buffy swings at him, he blocks the punch and backhands her.)*  
 Warren:           I'm the guy that beat you.  
                      *(Buffy swings again, Warren blocks and hits her. Buffy reels backward, looking shocked.)*  
 Warren:           And it's not the muscles, baby.  
                      *(He kicks her, Buffy flies backward.)*  
                      It's the brains. ("Entropy" 6.18)

Eventually, Buffy is able to destroy Warren's magical orbs – the sexual inference here being very obvious – and win the fight. Thus, metaphorically castrated and humiliated,

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<sup>149</sup> In the already mentioned episode "Gone" (6.11) Buffy is not terribly shocked when the people who have been observing her and interfering with her life during the previous weeks, are revealed to be former school mates of hers. She simply comments: "Oh. You. So what annoying thing are you gonna do to me now?" Later, after the boys have fled, Buffy's determination to bring the Trio down is not very pronounced: "Willow: *(surprised)* Oh my God, Buffy! – Buffy: *(pouting)* I know, they're gone. I guess we should chase them. - Willow: No, your hair! *(smiles)* It is adorable." This dialogue puts an end to the hunt for the Trio for that episode and the protagonists return to something relatively mundane: Buffy's new hairstyle.

Warren escapes, but not without a vow to eliminate Buffy “I swear to God I’m gonna take you down. You piece of...” (“Seeing Red,” 6.19).

Warren is now exclusively guided by his inner Shadow. Driven by embarrassment, vengeance, fury and hate, he procures a gun, shoots, and severely wounds Buffy, and by firing wildly into the air, unknowingly kills Tara, Willow's girlfriend. By killing Tara, Warren pushes Willow into the darkest realms of magic. Retribution for wounding Buffy and killing Tara has become personal and Warren has undoubtedly finally achieved his long sought after status as a true supervillain. Hoffmann has argued that throughout the sixth season of *BtVS* “the line between natural and supernatural is hardly distinct,” and that Warren’s actions “effectively eradicate any mappable distance between the magical and the mundane” (18). But if the worlds of magic and the mundane are now overlapping, then the question of justice becomes exceedingly complex. The audience is put into the difficult position of deciding which fate is appropriate for this particular “supervillain.” Buffy is determined to apply human law to human criminals, i.e., to find Warren and turn him over to the police.<sup>150</sup> Willow advocates “restorative justice,” i.e., the need to receive restoration for her personal pain. Punishing Warren by showing him exactly how powerful magic can be, Willow is resolved to kill the murderer of her girlfriend.

In this situation Willow and Buffy represent two very different, but also two very American notions of justice. Going back only about 100-150 years, the American Frontier of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a place of battle between “wilderness and civilization” (Turner). And this is exactly the battle the audience is following on the screen. Buffy clearly represents the civilized society in which criminals are dealt with by the police, the courts and the legal system, which provides one of the strongest pillars of American society. Willow, however, is much more primal in her desire for revenge, closer to the wilderness, which was essential to the development of uniquely American traits (cf. Turner). The need to dispense justice in a world where courts cannot be trusted to bring about any resolution relates to the biblical concept of “an-eye-for-an-eye” and is close to the notion of not only the necessity, but also the right to take care of justice oneself.

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<sup>150</sup> Jonathan and Andrew are already behind bars at this time in the narrative.

Superheroes like Buffy, and in this case Willow may be put into this category as well, have often been used in American popular culture to discuss notions of law and justice:

Superheroes reflect perceptions of failed or deficient law. They are therefore another vehicle for thinking discursively about law because of what they can say about society and its perceptions of the effectiveness of law, in the context of their manifesting a pre-modern, sacralised, view of embodied justice as opposed to modern constructs of law. (Bainbridge 455)

As much as the dichotomies of good and evil have become distorted, the lines between hero and villain blurred, so have ideas of what is right or wrong:

The black and white distinction between heroes and villains is eroded, the genre throws into question ideas of law and justice, differences between morality and law and evil and illegality (where actions can be good but illegal and legal but evil). (Bainbridge 460).

American popular culture knows a number of heroes who might just as well be called “vigilantes.” Batman, for example, is most certainly not a member of the established law enforcement, he is even hunted by the police at times, and yet, nobody would deny that he is a powerful force of justice and a hero. The question now is which outcome would provide the narrative closure that the creators feel is expected from them by their audience? So, over the last three episodes of the sixth season of *BtVS* questions of justice, law and vigilantism are discussed, offering the audience different positions, different lines of thought, exemplified by one of the strongest dialogues in the episode “Villains” (6.20). Xander, Buffy and her little sister Dawn are sitting in the living-room of the Summers’ house, after the lifeless body of Tara has just been taken away by the coroner. The mood is somber and each of the characters expresses emotions probably reflecting those of the active part of the audience:

Buffy:           *(sighing)* We need to find Willow.  
Xander:       Yeah, she’s off the wagon big-time. Warren’s a dead man if she finds him.  
Dawn:         *(bitterly)* Good.  
Buffy:         Dawn, don’t say that.  
Dawn:         Why not? *(the others look at her)* I’d do it myself if I could.  
Buffy:         Because you don’t really feel that way.  
Dawn:         Yes I do. And you should too. He killed Tara, and he nearly killed you. He needs to pay.  
Xander:       Out of the mouths of babes.

Buffy: Xander.  
Xander: I'm just saying he's ... he's just as bad as any vampire you've sent to dustville.  
Buffy: Being a Slayer doesn't give me a license to kill. Warren's human.  
Dawn: (*scoffs*) So?  
Buffy: So the human world has its own rules for dealing with people like him.  
Xander: Yeah, we all know how well those rules work.  
Buffy: Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don't. We can't control the universe. If we were supposed to ... then the magic wouldn't change Willow the way it does. And ... we'd be able to bring Tara back.  
Dawn: (*very quietly*) And Mom.  
Buffy: There are limits to what we can do. There should be. Willow doesn't want to believe that. And now she's messing with forces that want to hurt her. All of us.  
Xander: I just ... I've had blood on my hands all day. (*looks at Buffy*) Blood from people I love.  
Buffy: I know. And now it has to stop. Warren's going to get what he deserves. I promise. But I will *not* let Willow destroy herself.

Whereas some viewers will undoubtedly be supportive of Buffy and her decision to deliver Warren to the justice system, others may be slightly disappointed and feel more compassion for Dawn and Xander, who would not mind seeing Willow getting rid of Warren once and for all and exacting revenge for Buffy and Tara.

As mentioned above we are caught in the conundrum of negotiating concepts of law and justice, which may not necessarily be the same, especially in popular culture: "justice and law differ in kind; justice is transcendent or (quasi-transcendent) and is not deconstructible, while law is imminent and deconstructible" (Litowitz 97). If we contend that films and television shows are always inextricably linked with the times in which they were produced, that they are representative of values and ideals acknowledged in the dominant culture at a specific point, the resolution of the problem discussed above is very interesting. Willow eventually catches up with Warren, renders him unable to move through magic and proceeds to explain and to show him – and the audience – exactly why he deserves to die. Unable to stop Willow, Buffy has to look on while her best friend flays Warren, before going after the two remaining members of the Trio. One interpretation of this scene would be that Warren, who has remorselessly killed two young women by abusing magic, and has proven to be evil, deserves to die. Whether this death had to be quite as drastic may be arguable. However, Warren is recognized as evil and thus his death

is an inevitable consequence. Jonathan and Andrew, on the other hand, have not displayed true wickedness<sup>151</sup> and should therefore be dealt with by the legal system of the community. Indeed, Jonathan even redeems himself somewhat by helping Buffy fight Warren and acknowledging that they have to pay for their crimes by going to jail: “Xander’s right. We’re not leaving Sunnydale. When this is over, you and I are going back to jail to do our time” (“Two To Go” 6.21). Even though Andrew and Jonathan evade prison and end up running away to Mexico, the Scoobies succeed in protecting them from Willow and certain, painful deaths. Buffy and her friends emphasize repeatedly that they are not protecting Jonathan and Andrew because they like the boys so much, but because they do not want Willow to cross a line, after which she might be irrevocably lost: “The only reason it happens to be your lucky day is because [if] Willow kills you, she crosses a line, I lose a friend. (*gets right up in Jonathan’s face*) And I hate losing” (Buffy, “Two To Go” 6.21). Apparently the act of taking revenge on an evil murderer can be accepted, whereas the killing of his two helpers would take Willow too far into the realm of darkness to ever return; the consequence of which would be Buffy, as a tool of justice, having to try to bring down Willow, with the possibility of killing her in order to stop her. We are faced with a complex web of logic determining the often minute differences between law and justice in which the writers and creators of the show present us with possible, but never final, answers, inviting further, active discussion and negotiation.

### **Nemesis in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

For the Trio the idea of nemesis is firmly entrenched in American popular culture. It is an amalgamation of all the images of supervillains that WJA have encountered in films, television and video games. These fictional characters are an essential part of their cultural repertoire and set the frame of reference in their daily life. To the nerds, being a nemesis to Buffy means that they focus on her as the one person who could possibly destroy their plans to take over Sunnydale. In the course of the story, however, Buffy clearly becomes more of a nemesis to the Trio than the other way round: not only is the Slayer the one who deals out just punishment – (at least partly) to Jonathan and Andrew – but she is also triumphant as a strong opponent who cannot be overcome. Choosing Buffy as their

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<sup>151</sup> Or at the very least, they have not actively killed anyone.

nemesis is the result of projection and objectification of unwelcome character traits, the respective shadow elements, inherent in WJA.

Dealing with the Trio seems simple enough when Buffy insists on bringing the three nerds to justice, i.e., to jail. However, using the television show to negotiate notions of justice, the writers and creators of *BtVS* place the audience before the difficult task of deciding for themselves if and how justice should be served and if justice and law might in fact be two different concepts which require active interpretation. Seeing how Buffy is almost entirely unsuccessful in her desire to bring WJA to jail – Warren having been killed by Willow, Andrew and Jonathan escaping to Mexico – the show does not provide the audiences with comfortable and easy solutions to a problem, but encourages them to critically analyze social norms and values and eventually make up their own mind.

## ***5.2 Intimate Nemesis: Xena vs. Callisto and the Discussion of Guilt, Revenge, Sacrifice and Redemption***

Throughout the six years of its run *XWP* has created many original and interesting enemies for the main protagonist of the series. More than on any other show before or since, protagonists and antagonists to the hero are portrayed as and by powerful women. Xena's antagonists are often physically and intellectually strong women representing the dark powers that our hero must conquer to heal an ailing world. One of these women is set up as the biggest challenge to Xena: her arch-enemy Callisto. Callisto, like no other, embodies Xena's dark side, her Shadow, and is most certainly a nemesis figure.<sup>152</sup> As we have seen above, the nemesis figure in American television shows is often used to negotiate particular values, ideals, etc. In *XWP* the nemesis figure Callisto is utilized to discuss ideas of justice, guilt, revenge and forgiveness, as well as sacrifice and redemption. This chapter will give a short introduction of the character Callisto and her story-arc spanning five of *XWP*'s six seasons. After this, Callisto as a nemesis figure and an archetypal image of the Shadow will be examined before I begin with the analysis of the above mentioned concepts and their negotiation within the show.

### **Callisto as Xena's Nemesis and the Archetype of the Shadow**

Going back to the Merriam-Webster definition of "nemesis" mentioned above, the figure of Callisto incorporates both elements of nemesis as she is a character inflicting retribution or vengeance, and at the same time representing a formidable and (often victorious) rival or opponent to Xena. How these two facets of the understanding of nemesis are presented in *XWP* and how Callisto is designed as the archetypal Shadow to Xena's heroism is going to be discussed in the following.

The character of Callisto, one of the recurring arch-enemies of Xena is introduced in the first-season episode "Callisto" (1.22) as the leader of a small army ransacking a village and mercilessly slaughtering men, women and children. By identifying herself as "Xena, Warrior Princess" to the villagers, Callisto intends to "revive" Xena's reputation as a

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<sup>152</sup> Julius Caesar has also been considered as a nemesis and a mirror image of Xena (cf. Futrell 16). However, since Caesar is more a representation of Xena's Animus (cf. Jung, Aion, 151) than her Shadow, his inclusion here would be too much of an excursion.



ruthless killer. The reason for Callisto to do so is revenge. In the course of the episode the audience learns that Xena is indirectly responsible for the death of Callisto's family and the destruction of her home when, years ago, Xena's army burned down the village of Cirra.<sup>153</sup> As one of the few survivors of this massacre, Callisto swears to avenge her family and uses this concept of revenge as a coping mechanism for her own pain. The most successful strategy to achieve this revenge to Callisto lies in emulating her most hated enemy: "Callisto dedicates herself to vengeance, re-creating herself in the image of the evil Xena" (Kennedy 45). Callisto devotes her life to becoming an expertly skilled fighter, and the leader of a reasonably sized army, before considering herself prepared to face Xena. Since Callisto has fully immersed herself into the pain she felt when her family died, simply killing Xena is not enough. Her second-in-command, Theodorus, when interrogated by Xena explains: "She wants the world to see you as the demon! Then, she wants to kill you in combat" ("Callisto" 1.22). Callisto's claim to justice is an extreme example for the notion of "restorative justice" mentioned above. She takes the focus away from the offender, in this case Xena, and points at the harm which she, as a representative of the community, has suffered (cf. Olson and Dzur 139).

Of course, the paradigm of the series is that Xena is on a quest to atone for the atrocities she has committed in the past. Callisto thus serves as a constant reminder of this evil past and questions whether Xena's current quest absolves her from punishment for past offences toward society. As a classic nemesis figure, Callisto sees herself as dealing out just punishment and retribution. Of course, whether Callisto's extremely violent approach to justice is socially acceptable may be a point of argument. Nevertheless, Callisto serves as a most graphic sign that Xena has not always been a hero, but as much of a villain as Callisto is now. At the same time, she challenges Xena's quest of atonement as an adequate form of penitence.

By fashioning herself after the evil Xena of old, Callisto displays a wide range of similarities with the now heroic warrior: "I'm good! As good as you. And why not? You

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<sup>153</sup> It is not clear if the fire was intentional or simply an accident, as Xena explains: "It was just another village to conquer. Nothing out of the ordinary. The fire broke out, and I don't know if it was one of my men or just an accident, but there was a strong wind, and ... those flames just swept through that town like a wave of death. But the people were huddled in their houses 'cause they were afraid of my army. That was the one time when my army was responsible for the death of women and children. And there was just a handful of survivors. Obviously, Callisto was one of them" ("Callisto" 1.22).

made me” (“Callisto” 1.22). However, in blaming Xena for the crimes she herself is committing, Callisto refuses to take responsibility for the pain she causes others and exhibits what has been termed by psychology a martyr complex, in this case finding expression in so-called psychic masochism: “The masochistic individual unconsciously, that is to say, without awareness, arranges his or her life so as to ever be the victim” (Berger 253). Masochism in general can usually be traced back to an individual’s childhood as an “unconscious protest of the helpless against the perceived oppressor” (ibid. 254). When the child Callisto is helpless in the face of Xena’s army, which is destroying her family and her village, the oppressor is soon singled out: Xena. Psychologists claim that in the deepest unconscious, masochism is also “a plea for reconciliation and succor” (ibid.). In hurting Xena the way she has been hurt as a child, Callisto hopes to achieve a feeling of peace and contentment. And, as we will see below, reconciliation between Xena and Callisto during the fifth season serves as the ultimate closure for both characters and the fictional narrative.

Facing Callisto is one of the greatest challenges the writers of the show have created for Xena. The ethical dilemma Xena suffers is most painful: Xena is aware of the fact that she will never be able to actually take away any of the pain she has incurred during her time as the “Destroyer of Nations.” She also knows that Callisto has a point in saying that Xena has been the crucial determining factor in the development of Callisto’s character. Therefore, if Xena were to kill Callisto now, she would merely finish what she had started so many years earlier, thereby acting completely against her current conviction of serving the greater good and striving for atonement. On the other hand, she realizes she cannot allow Callisto to go free, as Callisto is quite open in telling Xena what would happen if she did:

Callisto:            Let me answer your question of what I would do if you let me go. You let me go, and I will dedicate my life to killing everything you’ve loved: your friends, your family, your reputation, even your horse. You see, I am being so honest with you because the idea of your pity ... is worse than death for me. You see, you created a monster with integrity, Xena. Scary, isn’t it? (“Callisto” 1.22).

From the above quote we can easily observe Callisto’s obsession with Xena: obsessed with causing her pain and obsessed with the vision of eventually killing her enemy and getting her revenge. As we have seen above, obsession is yet another element of nemesis, albeit

usually in a more modern context. Reminiscent of the legend of Pygmalion, Callisto believes that she and Xena are intimately connected, because she sees Xena as her creator. In contrast to the Greek myth, however, Xena does not fall in love with her creation, but feels the responsibility to eliminate her.

Callisto is convinced that both women are equally strong and cunning warriors and have a certain understanding how the other one “ticks.” However, to Callisto’s obsession there are only two possible outcomes, either Callisto kills Xena or Xena kills Callisto. For Callisto, death is nothing to be afraid of, and we learn that she actually sees it as a desirable alternative to the pain of living:

Callisto: *(hanging on to a burning rope situated c. 30 feet over the ground)*  
In a way, I’m disappointed Xena. There was a part of me that hoped that you would win and put out the rage in my heart. Sometimes, it even scares me. But then I get over it.  
*(one of Callisto’s army tries to put out the fire on the rope)*  
No! Let it burn.  
*(the rope tears, Callisto falls laughing a maniacal laugh, but before Callisto hits the ground, Xena catches the rope, and saves Callisto. Callisto cries out angrily)*  
No! No! (“Callisto” 1.22)

When Xena saves Callisto and turns her over to local law enforcement, the blonde warrior is deeply disappointed. Callisto has always seen herself as the only worthy rival of Xena, having entered into a direct competition with the “Destroyer of Nations.” But now Xena has dropped out of the game by turning morally respectable – a source of deep regret and disgust for Callisto: “You know, there used to be some respect mixed up in my hatred for you. But, tsk, tsk, not anymore. Your petty scruples are an embarrassment. As a villain you were awesome. As a hero, you are a sentimental fool” (“Callisto” 1.22).

The way in which the character of Callisto is created and presented throughout the series by the creators of the show makes this particular warrior woman the personification of Xena’s Shadow and vice versa. As we have seen above, Jung claims that the Shadow is an unconscious part of a persona where those traits are stored and repressed that the ego, the conscious part of us, would feel uncomfortable with. One essential paradigm for the definition of the heroic character of Xena is that she has a strong “dark side” which she acknowledges, but in spite of this acknowledgement has difficulties controlling. Callisto lives this dark side in an unrestrained fashion. She delights in fighting, in causing pain, in killing. In that she is the exact image of what Xena used to be and what she still tries to

overcome. Xena acknowledges just how similar the strategies of Callisto and of the old, evil Xena are in a short dialogue with her companion Gabrielle in the episode “Callisto”:

- Gabrielle:       *(concerned, to Xena)* Are you all right?  
 Xena:               *(referring to a number of people they are passing who have apparently fled from Callisto)* See that look of fear and hatred on their faces?  
 Gabrielle:       Yeah.  
 Xena:               I used to wanna see that look. It meant I was doing my job right.

As already discussed in chapter two, Xena knows about her “dark sister,” and she also knows that it is an essential part of who she is and what she is. In contrast to Callisto, however, she has become aware of the fact that people who annoy her immensely, often bring about this reaction because they are touching upon a dark part of Xena’s persona, of which she struggles to become aware. Callisto, living her wickedness with joyful abandon, is still not happy. She envies Xena’s friendship with Gabrielle, Hercules and others and her strength at turning away from inflicting pain on others as compensation for her own problems. In choosing the “bright side” Xena has betrayed Callisto. She has refused the intimate relationship with her evil sister. This instills anger within Callisto which she is unable to register as a projection of her own deficiencies. We should also not forget that Callisto started out as an innocent, most likely, happy and good-natured child who chose to repress any good qualities within herself in order to cope with an overwhelming situation. Hudson Leick, the actress playing Callisto explains:

If I really think about the character Callisto, I think it would be more interesting to think that she didn’t come from an ugliness inside her already. I think it’s more interesting to think of her like just a regular human being. And we all have ugliness inside us, we just do. And then when something so horrific happened to her family that she had no control over, being a girl – a young girl, the only way she could gain her control back was to become the evil itself that destroyed the family. So that way she was no longer out of control but in power.” (Hudson Leick, Interview DVD “Fallen Angel”)

It has become quite clear that Xena and Callisto have been constructed as each other’s nemeses. What the function of the respective nemesis figure is will be discussed in the following.

### **Functions of Nemesis in *XWP***

Having burdened Xena with a formidable nemesis figure such as Callisto, it is necessary to find a narrative closure which is adequate to the internal discourse of the show and the

audience. In order to find this closure, the writers and creators of *XWP* use the nemesis figure to discuss ideas and values relevant to contemporary American culture and society, such as justice, guilt, revenge, forgiveness, sacrifice and redemption. Perhaps because *XWP* has been designed as a family show, i.e., young children are expected to be viewers of this series, as well as their parents, the discussion of particular norms and values is tinged with conspicuous American optimism. In the following paragraphs I will examine how these values, as mentioned above, are presented and interpreted by the show.

### **Guilt and Justice**

During the first four seasons of *XWP* the relationship between Xena and Callisto is primarily determined by notions of guilt, justice and revenge. As we have already seen above, Xena's guilt over the atrocities she committed during her career as the "Destroyer of Nations" is the driving force behind her current quest of atonement. Xena is constantly aware of this guilt and she is full of regret, too:

- Callisto: Oh, the good Xena. What happened to you? One day you just decided to fight for justice?  
Xena: Something like that.  
Callisto: And all the shattered people you left behind were now supposed to cheer you, is that it?  
Xena: No. What happened to you was terrible. It was my fault and I'm sorry. ("Callisto" 1.22)

In *XWP* Callisto serves as the personification of Xena's feelings of guilt, thus giving form to an otherwise abstract concept. The guilt in Xena is twofold, the personal remorse she feels towards Callisto, as Xena realizes that her actions in the past helped create the evil warrior of today. But guilt also on a more general level, trying to live with the atrocities she committed as the "Destroyer of Nations." In her open enjoyment of strength, power and cruelty, Callisto reminds Xena of what she used to be and how she used to feel. Though one of the paradigms of the series, Xena's "dark side" is something she constantly struggles with:

- Callisto: You're beginning to hate me. You've fought it because of some silly sense of guilt, huh? Now, I'm a painful reminder of what you used to be, and how you may never leave it behind ("Callisto" 1.22).

The similarity of the two characters is sustained by their personal histories and the motives behind starting their respective careers as warriors. Xena took up the sword when her home

village was attacked by the warlord Cortese. Callisto took up the sword when her home village was attacked by the warlord Xena. Often it is assumed that a confrontation with violence in a person's early life renders sufficient explanation for that person becoming violent themselves (cf. Englander 4). However, this explanation is too narrow as there are numerous causes and circumstances decisive for a person becoming violent or not (ibid.). The most obvious explanation for Callisto's insistence on using violence is a distinct mental unhingedness which Callisto is shown to enjoy. If we look deeper into Callisto's and Xena's respective rationale for becoming a warrior, we can perceive yet another difference. Xena started to fight in defense of her home and the people she loved; Callisto's motives were at all times directed toward personal gain, i.e., revenge. One interpretation of these observations would be that American society accepts violence when "evil" is fought to help others, whereas using violence for personal gain is disgraceful.<sup>154</sup>

Bringing Callisto to justice is a difficult task for Xena. As we have seen above, Xena is stuck in an ethical dilemma, either leaving a job unfinished or feeling responsible for Callisto's continuing cruelty. The Xena of old would probably simply have killed this enemy and be done with it. The newly reformed Xena, however, a hero fighting for the greater good, is resolved to deliver Callisto into the hands of justice. A justice system, by the way, that has little to do with ancient Greece and much more with American ideas of law and punishment. Xena brings Callisto to the local prison, defending her from a lynch mob, always insisting that Callisto should get a "fair trial" ("Callisto" 1.22).

In the last scene of the episode we see Callisto and her army in chains on their way to a high-security prison.<sup>155</sup> The righteousness of Xena's actions is confirmed by her companion Gabrielle:

Gabrielle: I'm glad you saved Callisto.  
Xena: It was the right thing to do. ("Callisto" 1.22)

The language which is used in this process of dealing out justice is distinctly American. Xena speaks of "prison," of a "fair trial," a "high-security prison," and so on.

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<sup>154</sup> This notion of acceptable violence is often discussed in war situations. Not only in the United States, of course, but if we consider their reasons for entering, e.g., WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the first Gulf War, we see that the official statements always mentioned the aim to save mankind from fascism, communism, and dictatorships, respectively, and to make the world, a better, more democratic place.

<sup>155</sup> This high-security facility is shown in the episode "Return of Callisto" (2.05).

Consequently, American viewers will be able to easily understand Xena's idea of justice and find the legal system of their own contemporary society endorsed.

When Xena and Callisto meet next in "Return of Callisto" (2.05), Callisto has broken out of prison, and killed Gabrielle's husband Perdicus. After a fast-cut chariot chase, both Xena and Callisto are trapped in a pit of quicksand. Xena is able to pull herself out and is now faced with the question of whether to help Callisto or to let her die. In spite of Callisto's cries of anger, pain and fear, Xena decides to let Callisto die and watches her being dragged down by the quicksand. From Xena's expression it is clear that she is uncertain whether she has made the right decision. The most immediate consequence of Xena's conscious failure to render assistance is an increased feeling of guilt. Once again this guilt features prominently in the subsequent encounter of Xena and Callisto two episodes later in "Intimate Stranger" (2.07). In the mythology of *XWP* the dead are not only able to hear the thoughts of the living, but they can also invade the dreams of the guilty. So, when Xena is tormented by guilt-inflicted dreams, Callisto sees her chance, and with the help of Ares, God of War, she switches bodies with Xena to escape from Tartarus<sup>156</sup> and continue on her path of revenge in the realm of the living. Callisto, getting back with her old army, kidnaps the inhabitants of Xena's hometown, including Xena's mother. Callisto's plan is to imprison them in a cave and burn them to death just like her own family died in the fire set ablaze by Xena's army. The figure of the mother is a prominent symbol in this episode. Before Xena's mother can be killed, Xena manages to take Callisto back into the dream state in which Callisto tricked Xena into switching bodies at the beginning of the episode. At first Callisto is rather unperturbed because she is convinced she will be able to return to the "real world" any time she chooses:

Callisto:	Xena ... you put me to sleep. This is a dream.
Xena:	You're only half right, Callisto. As you said: the dream is the border between the real world and the underworld.
Callisto:	It makes no difference. I can still wake up from this nightmare. And I will have no guilt to make my dreams restless.
Xena:	Don't you?
Callisto:	Mm-mm. However evil you think I am, Xena ... my soul is clean, because it's all on you. You started this when you killed my family. ("Intimate Stranger" 2.07)

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<sup>156</sup> Tartarus, or Tartaros, in Greek mythology is part of the underworld where the wicked are punished. It also served as prison, for example, when Zeus overthrew the Titans and banished Cronos to this place.

This is exactly the line of reasoning Xena has expected. According to the show's mythology, in this dream state direct communication with the dead is possible. Once again a mother appears, imbued with highest authority on morality, righteousness, and love:

Xena: Are you thinking of your family now? Because when you think of the dead ...

Callisto's mother: The dead can hear you.

Callisto: (*astonished*) Mama? (*accusing*) Look at her, Xena. You look at my mother! She's here to remind you of your past.

Callisto's mother: (*speaking very calmly*) No. I'm not here because of Xena. I've come because of you.

Callisto: (*not understanding*): Me?

Callisto's mother: Yes. Every time you killed ... you were killing me.

Xena: How many of your victims had faces, Callisto? How many had families? Sons and daughters who loved their parents. How many were just like your mother when they died at your hand?

Callisto: No. No, you *can't* make me feel guilty.

Xena: You're right. Only you can do that.

Callisto: (*pleading*) Mother.

Xena: I've got my own past to deal with. But I'm not taking the weight of your crimes anymore.

Callisto's mother: Look around you. These people didn't need to die. (*images appear from the shadows, becoming people killed by Callisto*)

Callisto: No! No, you go away! I didn't do anything! She did it! Not me!

Xena: You can't shut it out. It's like a crashing wave. Once it starts, there's no stopping it.

Callisto's mother: I love you, Callisto. You'll always be my daughter. You have to face your crimes

Callisto: (*desperately*) No, no! ("Intimate Stranger" 2.07)

It is not uncommon on a family show like *XWP* that the voice of authority should be a family member. In patriarchal societies this family member is usually the father, or the eldest male in the family. However, *XWP* breaks with historic concepts and creates a society in which the most important people are women. Therefore, the person upon whose opinion the highest value is placed and whose authority cannot be doubted is the mother, as it has repeatedly been stressed: "the maternal role as positive, selfless, self-sacrificing, and divinely validated" (Futrell 21). Whereas Xena has learned not to take on responsibility for the choices and deeds of others, Callisto is now taught that one has to take on responsibility for one's actions. The idea of being honest and taking responsibilities for



your own actions is strongly connected with Christian concepts infusing American culture. Christian religion and the value systems inherent to this belief, continue to be decisive factors in contemporary American society (cf. Stark and Glock; Perrin; Bishin, Stevens and Wilson). A Christian is expected to be:

loving, compassionate, kind, slow to anger, honest, free of worry, humble, gentle, patient, generous towards the poor, optimistic/positive, and forgiving. Knowledge, beliefs and behaviors associated with Christian religious commitment should, therefore, result in specific practical outcomes manifested in the life of the Christian. (Perrin 535)

Despite the fact that *XWP* never explicitly mentions Christianity, the hero figures continually display character traits which are strongly associated with Christian values, such as being compassionate and forgiving, and aspire to shape their behavior towards these ideals. The *XWP* storylines dealing with revenge and forgiveness thus further emphasize the validity of Christian value systems. At the same time the narratives endorse the idea of reintegrating a criminal into society, as is often the case in the American justice system:

Resolution is said to come from offenders taking responsibility and making amends for the harm done and from communities supporting the victim and providing offenders with opportunities and skills to reintegrate as contributing members. (Olsen and Dzur 139)

### **Revenge and Forgiveness**

Revenge is an issue which is central to the Xena-Callisto story arc. Callisto has dedicated her life to revenge and through her action incites feelings of revenge in others. Throughout the series, however, revenge is rebuffed as the solution to any problem, and not able to provide any of the satisfaction desired.

In the first episode in which Callisto appears ("Callisto" 1.22), a young boy is killed when Callisto and her army attack a village. The father of this boy, Melas, swears to avenge the death of his son: "I'm not trying to run away from the pain. I want to satisfy it. And the only way I can do that is with Callisto's blood" ("Callisto" 1.22). When Xena captures Callisto and takes her to the local prison, Melas is the one organizing a lynch mob to kill Callisto and make her pay. The voice of reason commenting on revenge throughout

the episode is Gabrielle. She insists that if you let feelings of anger, hatred and revenge dominate your actions; you will only succeed in hurting innocent people. Gabrielle's idea of how to overcome hate and revenge is closely linked to Christian values of love and forgiveness, a recurring theme throughout the whole series.<sup>157</sup>

- Gabrielle: When will this end? Look at Melas. I know that he's a good man, but, this hate is making him an obsessed killer. Somebody has to say no to this lust for revenge.
- Xena: That is so hard to do.
- Gabrielle: You did it! When your village was destroyed, you were ... infected with bloodlust. But you overcame it!
- Xena: I was lucky. I saw what I'd become, and I was able to turn around. But if something happened to Mother, or Hercules, or you ... I might do just the same.
- Gabrielle: No. No look, you promise me. If something happens to me, you will not become a monster. There's only one way to end this cycle of hatred, and it's through love ... and forgiveness. ("Callisto" 1.22)

Forgiveness is not simply perceived as a way of managing an overwhelming desire for revenge and paving the way for accepting justice as distributed by society, but it is essential for one's own peace of mind. When Callisto kills Gabrielle's husband Perdicus in "Return of Callisto" (2.05), Gabrielle seeks to take revenge on Callisto, but then, when she is standing right in front of Callisto, ready to stab her with a sword, Xena's companion is not able to go through with her revenge, declaring: "I won't take a life ... even yours. I'd rather die" ("Return of Callisto" 2.05). Perhaps slightly naïve, Gabrielle insists on a deeply buried humanity within Callisto, in order to justify the necessity of forgiveness to save her own soul:

- Gabrielle: Xena ... do you think that, deep down, Callisto feels sorry for the things that she's done?
- Xena: No!
- Gabrielle: (after a short pause) I do. I have to or I can't forgive her. And if I can't forgive her, I can't move on. Goodbye, Callisto. ("A Necessary Evil" 2.14)

Gabrielle's behavior in this situation reinforces the biblical imperative of loving your enemies. By insisting on the humanity of Callisto, Gabrielle is able to forgive her enemy, very much like Christ has taught his followers: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another,

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<sup>157</sup> The problem of revenge appears in several episodes of the series, e.g., "The Debt Part I & II" (3.06 & 3.07), "Locked Up and Tied Down" (4.07), "Who's Gorkhan" (6.04), and many others. However, in this chapter I will focus on revenge throughout the Xena-Callisto storyline.

tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32). In the Xena - Callisto narrative, *XWP* employs concepts from the Christian religion to find a solution for the characters. Since Gabrielle is constructed as a positive character, her validation of Christian principles hints at the crucial significance of Christian religion in contemporary American culture.

A further validation of the idea that forgiving your enemies makes you free can be seen when Callisto finally achieves what she has lived for all these years: revenge. Having helped the demon Hope<sup>158</sup> kill Xena’s son Solan, Callisto believes that Xena finally understands her pain. However, this triumph does not give her the satisfaction she thought it would, as she confesses to Xena in the episode “Maternal Instincts” (3.11):

Callisto:        You don’t seem to get it, do you? You’ve won. All these years I’ve spent, living to destroy you? Thinking that, only if I could give you the same pain that you gave me, I’d be rid of it and life would go on. And then I do and nothing changes. I don’t feel better ... just empty. So you let me go, Xena. You can’t win this battle. And you’ve already won the war.

Therefore, if revenge does not work, we need to come back to what Gabrielle said in “A Necessary Evil” which is that only by forgiving the person who has hurt you, you will be able to lead a content life. The idea that revenge does not lead to satisfaction is a common motif in American popular culture. One example, which provides us with a similar solution, is the epic film *Ben Hur* (1959). Having turned from friend to foe, Judah Ben-Hur eventually revenges years of slavery, and the imprisonment of his mother and sister, when he wins a chariot race against his former friend, turned arch-enemy, the Roman Messala. Messala dies after the race, but Ben-Hur cannot be happy in this revenge, because both his mother and sister have contracted leprosy, as a result of their unjust imprisonment. Happiness for Ben-Hur and his family is only restored when the protagonist witnesses Jesus’s crucifixion and hears him speak of forgiveness while on the cross. Ben-Hur tells his mother that “I felt His voice take the sword out of my hand.” Being finally able to forgive Messala and the Romans for the pain they have caused him, Ben-Hur can now live happily ever after. Even more so, because when Jesus dies on the cross, Ben-Hur’s mother and sister are miraculously healed of their illness. Just like Gabrielle in *XWP*, Christian values save Ben-Hur from a continually unhappy life.

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<sup>158</sup> Hope was born to Gabrielle after she had been magically and forcibly impregnated by the evil god Dahak while travelling Britannica with Xena (cf. “The Deliverer” 3.04; “Gabrielle’s Hope” 3.05).

The idea that forgiveness is the only solution to overcome emotions of anger, hatred and revenge is perhaps most strongly featured in *XWP*'s episode "The Bitter Suite" (3.12). This episode is unique in the six-season run of *XWP* in that it is set up as a musical episode. Incorporating the musical genre into a family drama series such as *XWP* gives the creators more freedom to use unusual settings and characters, often of dreamlike quality. The images are strongly inspired by figures and symbols of a Tarot game (cf. creator Rob Tapert, Interview DVD, "The Bitter Suite" 3.12), which stand in stark contrast to the regular cinematography of the show. Perhaps a musical episode also makes it possible to use dialogue which would normally be considered implausible or too corny. Whereas some emotional turmoil might be awkward and/or too complex to put into spoken words on a family show like *XWP*, the same emotions put into song are easier to understand and accept. Words and music combined reaches the audience on two levels: the words speak to the mind, and the music evokes and guides emotions.

The narrative leading up to the episode is that Xena's son Solon has been killed by Gabrielle's demon daughter Hope, and Hope has been poisoned by her own mother. Both women grieve for their children and their relationship which seems to have shattered. In "The Bitter Suite," the hate, which the former friends feel for each other, is described in sentiments strongly resembling New Age pop culture lingo:

It begins very small  
Seems like nothing much at all.  
Just a germ, just a speck, just a grain.  
But the seed has been sewn,  
And before you know it's grown.  
It has spread through your life like a stain.  
And its power will strangle your love and your joy.  
And its hunger consumes, for it lives to destroy!  
Hate is the star; it becomes who you are.  
Not the hated but the hater  
Has a torment that's greater.  
It will eat you alive, consume you and spit you out.  
Hate's gonna win, that there's no doubt about!  
Hate doesn't care who you are!  
Hate is the star! (*Hate is the Star*)

Similar as in the case of revenge, as we have seen above, the person who hates is more afflicted than the one that is hated. Hate is described as a threat to spiritual peace which is the desired state of being for a person. These negative emotions can only be overcome,

once again, by love and forgiveness, as Xena sings towards the end of the episode to her friend Gabrielle:

I'm sorry, please help me, forgive me.  
 Don't hate me, don't leave me, forgive me.  
 Forgive me my debt as only you could.  
 Forgive me the hate; replace evil with good.  
 Forgive me and find out that you  
 Will be able to forgive yourself, too.  
 [...]

Forgive me, I'm sorry, believe me.  
 Stop hating, stop hurting, forgive me.  
 Forgive those who harm you,  
 Do good for those who hate.  
 Forgive, if not forget,  
 I know it's not too late.  
 Forgive me and you'll discover, too,  
 That the love of your love is you.  
 (*The Love of your Love*)

In this song we do not only find references to Christian forgiveness, but even some of the lines are strongly reminiscent of biblical texts. When Xena sings, for example “forgive me my debt as only you could,” the resemblance to a line from the gospel of Matthew “forgive us our debts, as also we have forgiven our debtors” (Mat. 6:12) is easily noticeable. Later on, as Xena implores Gabrielle to “forgive those who harm you / do good for those who hate,” these lines can be traced, almost literally, in the gospel of Luke: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27).

Again, Christianity is never explicitly mentioned or discussed in *XWP*. Nevertheless, the strong influence of Christian philosophies, especially when it comes to overcoming negative emotions like hate or revenge with love and forgiveness, are more than obvious. Consequently, we can conclude that Christian morals in contemporary American culture are still seen as crucial family values. *XWP* promotes these belief systems, even though the terminology used may differ slightly.

### **Sacrifice and Redemption**

*XWP* is strongly influenced by a mixture of Greek and Roman mythology, Eastern Religions, and always, Christian religion. In the fifth season the story arc surrounding Xena and Callisto is finally resolved and the investment in Christian mythology<sup>159</sup> again becomes central to the narrative. Conversely, the writer of the first episode of the fifth

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<sup>159</sup> According to writer R.J.Stewart the episode “Fallen Angel” (5.01), also borrows motifs from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (cf. Interviews, “Fallen Angel” 5.01). Those motifs are relatively clear, when Xena, for example, is a demon and rallies her fellow inhabitants of hell to a raid on heaven. Furthermore, the war between demons and angels is one focus of Milton’s work and the *XWP* story arc. However, where Milton strongly emphasizes the superiority of God and his supporters, *XWP* shows a battle in which neither side is able to gain the upper hand. *Paradise Lost* propagates plain and unfaltering obedience to God and his angels. In stark contrast to this idea of obedience, Xena does not accept a higher power to regulate her life. When Xena is told that saving Gabrielle from hell is none of her business, she is undeterred and demands and takes the agency required to protect her friend.

season, “Fallen Angel,” R.J. Stewart claims that Christianity does not really play much of a role since: “the idea of heaven and hell is secular mainstream” (Stewart, Interview, “Fallen Angel” 5.01). This claim might be supported by the fact that terms such as “God” or “Satan” are never mentioned on the television show. However, the series does refer to “god of love” and “the master of hell,” respectively; thus the meanings of those symbolic figures may be more open, yet their origins are still very evident.

After their bodies have been crucified, the souls of Xena and Gabrielle are caught in the middle of a war between heaven and hell. Whereas Xena and Gabrielle are lifted towards higher spheres by a flock of guardian angels, Callisto, whose face has been transformed into a demonic mask, is, at that moment in the narrative, trapped in hell. When the guardian angels are attacked by demons, Gabrielle’s soul falls down into the realms of hell. The only way to rescue her is for Xena to become an archangel. Before Xena can join the ranks of the archangels, however, she needs to undergo a purification ritual to test her worthiness. The assessment of Xena’s worthiness once again utilizes symbols and motifs from Christian mythology. The hero is purified by fire and reborn as a new person by baptism: “You’ve walked through the fire of purification. Now, as the divine water sanctifies your existence, your cleansing is complete” (Archangel Michael, “Fallen Angel” 5.01). This idea of purgatory, the cleansing of a person’s soul to “achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1030) is borrowed from Roman Catholic doctrine. The creators of the series complement the necessity of purgatory with the rebirth by “holy water” for the hero to conclude her apotheosis (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 149 ff.). In the development of the series Xena’s purification can be seen both as a requirement for the solution of the present problem, but also as one of the most important stages in her quest for atonement. It shows that Xena’s soul can and will be saved eventually.

Xena becoming an archangel also illustrates a break with patriarchal systems in the Christian religion. The Bible knows only male archangels, such as Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and so on. In *XWP*, both Xena and Gabrielle become archangels not because they are chosen for this position by a god or higher power, but because they demand this status for themselves in order to help each other. Gender is never a question in this particular narrative. However, when Xena attains the rank of archangel we can interpret this as a

triumph over patriarchal power structures and traditional models of gendered behavior. Throughout the series, Xena challenges male power systems inherent to her culture. She asserts her own exceptional status by being physically and mentally superior to most of her contemporary society.<sup>160</sup> However, Xena is not a feminist who consciously defies male traditions on principle. As a matter of fact, the “Xenaverse” is strangely gender neutral for being set in ancient Greece. Villains and heroes can be male or female, and their position is never questioned with regard to gender, but only in context with cultural or social concepts such as individualism or justice. Therefore, Xena becoming an archangel has much more significance in the world of the viewer than in the “Xenaverse” itself. For the audience, the notion of female archangels is new and not part of the traditional Christian belief system. However, since *XWP* hardly ever discusses power struggles from a gendered point of view, the audience can easily accept the idea that Xena becomes an archangel, and is encouraged to question why women should not be able to achieve a status previously reserved for men in contemporary society, as well.

Xena becoming an archangel in the narrative places her in a dangerous position. Since she is “purified and full of compassion,” the suffering she will see in Hell will “break [her] heart” (Archangel Michael, “Fallen Angel” 5.01). And that is exactly what happens. During the fight with the demons, Xena faces off with Callisto and is on the brink of slaying her, when instead, in a Christ-like act of utmost compassion, Xena gives her own soul to save that of her erstwhile nemesis Callisto. Having been saved by Xena, Callisto becomes an angel, unable to remember her past as a ruthless killer. When Gabrielle learns that Callisto is destined for paradise whereas Xena will have to stay as a demon in hell for all eternity she is outraged. Michael, however, explains: “Xena called it justice. She chose to suffer in Callisto’s place. When you look at her now ... what you see is what she would have become if Xena had not killed her family” (“Fallen Angel” 5.01). So Xena’s ultimate sacrifice of her own soul redeems not only Callisto but Xena’s conscience as well. Xena has finally found a way to actually take away the pain she once brought to others. Acknowledging the romanticized nature of the narrative and the mythicized image of removing someone else’s pain and evilness, there is still a strong plea inherent in this episode as Hudson Leick, the actress who embodies Callisto, remarks: “That’s a comic

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<sup>160</sup> It should be noted that in the “Xenaverse,” women are usually not placed in a historically accurate position. Whereas ancient Greece was a very male-centered world, the universe of *XWP* depicts women in a much more contemporary Western fashion.

book version. But I think as human beings; we can do that for each other” (Interview, DVD “Fallen Angel”). Once again the close connection of the narrative of the series with regard to contemporary society is emphasized. The necessity of taking responsibility for one’s actions and the responsibility for other people are placed at the center of the narrative with the promise of stately rewards if one strives for the ideals promoted by their culture.

Giving up her own soul to save Callisto does not mean that Xena is now stuck in demon-form for the rest of the series. With the help of the hero’s old friend Eli, a messiah-like figure preaching peace and love, and the newly sanctified Callisto, both Xena and Gabrielle are resurrected. Eli and Callisto pray over the lifeless bodies of Gabrielle and Xena, and by a supernatural power (easily to be interpreted as the Christian God) the two protagonists are brought back to the world. As a last gift, Callisto impregnates Xena with her spirit. Later in the show we learn that not only did Callisto miraculously activate Xena’s pregnancy, but apparently the “god of love” has decided that Callisto’s spirit is to be reborn in Xena’s child, as well. Thus the characters have come full circle and the narrative, as well as the audience, finds closure:

Callisto:	Xena. My time has come to be reincarnated into the mortal world. And the body that will bear my spirit has been ordained. I can think of no greater mother than you.
Xena:	It was you all along? You gave me this child.
Callisto:	In the past, I destroyed your life, Xena.
Xena:	And I destroyed yours. Maybe it’s time that we both gave back what we one took from each other (“Seeds of Faith” 5.09).

Xena’s child redeems both Xena and Callisto from their past, returning to them “the ability to love and to experience the love of a mother” (Kennedy 45).

The fact that the entire process from inception to birth happens without the direct involvement of any men is rather unique in a family series.<sup>161</sup> Similar to the Christian story of the Immaculate Conception, Xena is impregnated by a supernatural power. However, in *XWP*, this supernatural power is not a (male) god, but the female angel Callisto. Even though Christian mythology is strongly referenced, *XWP* transcends the patriarchal power relations inherent in this religion and gives all agency to women. This can also be seen when Xena’s daughter Eve (yet another biblical name), later becomes responsible for the downfall of the Olympian Gods and acts as the messenger of Eli and the so-called God of

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<sup>161</sup> An examination of this extraordinary storyline can would be highly interesting, but, unfortunately, cannot be included in this study.



Light. Ideals of love and peacefulness are endorsed, but the power lies with women throughout the narrative of *XWP*.

That notions of justice, guilt, revenge, forgiveness, sacrifice and redemption have a deeper meaning than simply being a tool for the development of characters and story in a fictional television series, is suggested by Hudson Leick, who comments: “The premise of being redeemed, I love. I love the idea of, from anywhere we go as human beings, we can forgive ourselves, and find our own love. And I like that.” (Interview, “Fallen Angel” 5.01)

### **Nemesis in *Xena: Warrior Princess***

Like few other nemesis figures on American television, the character of Callisto is intimately connected to her antagonist, the hero Xena. Not only has Callisto shaped her life after her hated role model, and thus mirrors the evil person that Xena once was, but by the accumulation of pain and guilt, both Callisto and Xena recognize the fatal significance of the other in their respective lives.

Xena’s nemesis Callisto is used in *XWP* to discuss a number of moral issues which are contextualized in the narratives. Notions of justice are usually connected with Christian values, such as love, peace and forgiveness. *XWP* strongly endorses the American justice system by acknowledging concepts of police, justice, courts of law, or jury systems within the narrative as the appropriate way to deal with criminals. Given the choice, Xena would rather see offenders in jail than dead. This affirmation of the American legal system can be observed throughout the series.

However, some exceptions to this reliance on modern American ideas of justice and law do exist in *XWP*. One of those exceptions is Xena’s nemesis Callisto. When Callisto repeatedly escapes from the grasp of the authorities and continues injuring Xena and her family, the Warrior Princess resolves to kill her nemesis. Since Callisto’s crimes throughout the series range from lying and kidnappings to murder, the viewer is inclined to consider death for Callisto as restorative justice and consequently a justified punishment. When the authorities are not able to control a criminal, the superhero, i.e., Xena, must remove the threat to society and create a symbolic compensation for all losses suffered by punishing the delinquent (cf. Bainbridge; cf. Olson and Dzur).

But more important than the restoration of justice by capital punishment (which, by the way, never quite works with Callisto, as she tends to return to the narrative, after apparently dying, as a goddess and demon respectively), is the notion of forgiveness. The idea of forgiveness and consequent redemption is not only inspired by Christian ideology,

but even the setting to the final confrontation of Xena and Callisto – eventually leading to the salvation of both women’s souls – are computer-rendered images of “heaven” and “hell,” the epitome of Christian mythology. According to *XWP*, inner peace and the wholeness of a person can only be achieved by self-sacrifice and love for the other. As *XWP* has been designed as a family show, there is little subtlety in the discussions concerning revenge and justice: revenge is futile, the cycle of violence and hate can only be broken by forgiveness and love, and justice is closely connected to the legal system acknowledged by society. Children, who watch the show, and probably some of the adult audience as well, see American ideals of justice and Christian values confirmed.

Though affirming particular Christian norms, *XWP* rejects traditional power structures delineated in Christian scripture. Women are central characters in *XWP* narratives and tend to be given more powers and problems than the average male individual on the show. The female protagonists of *XWP* are self-asserted and successfully claim agency over their own lives.

### **5.3 Concealed “Nemesis”: Kenneth Irons and the Abuse of Power in Witchblade**

More than the two other series which have been discussed above, the narratives in *Witchblade* are so effective because they are highly complex to the point of being obscure. Even though much of the initial mystery is clarified throughout the series, there are a good number of riddles that remain unsolved and thus strengthen the supernatural atmosphere of the show. Especially events or characters which center on narratives concerning the *Witchblade* artifact are shadowy, and hard or even impossible to explain. Thus, when it comes to distinguishing any character in the series as a nemesis figure to Sara Pezzini, we have to look deep into the mythology of the whole narrative, spanning the entire first season of the show, to see that the character most fitting to this role would be Kenneth Irons.

To recapitulate shortly: Kenneth Irons is introduced as a self-made multi-billionaire and head of the global player *Vorschlag Industries*. It is never explained what this company does exactly, however, throughout the series we learn that they are, for example, involved with different media, scientific research and weapon manufacturing. They also have connections to law enforcement and the American government.

Already in the pilot episode the audience is told that Irons has been interested in the *Witchblade* for a long time. Just how long this interest has been a major focus in Irons' life is revealed later on in the series when his personal physician mentions that the billionaire is 96 years old at the time of the narrative (cf. “Convergence” 1.10), even though his outward appearance is roughly that of a 40 year-old man.

Several years ago Irons found and attempted to wield the *Witchblade* artifact. This painful experience left Irons with the knowledge that only women can use the *Witchblade*:

Irons:           And though I tried, for all my force of will, I could not keep it on my hand. The gauntlet burned me and seared my flesh until I had to rip it from my wrist. But even my brief exposure was enough to bind me to it forever. To make me a part of it. To allow me to see some of what it sees, but not all. That is my blessing and my curse. I understand the way it thinks. I know what it wants (Pilot Episode).

A lasting reminder of Irons' failed attempt at usurpation of power is some scarred tissue on Irons' right hand which appears as two interlocking circles, reminiscent of the symbol for eternity. That the *Witchblade* marks its wielders with this particular sign alludes to the idea that the power of the *Witchblade* is universal and eternal. In direct correlation to this notion stands the fact that only women can wield the artifact. Women in *WB* not only embody

warriors, but also the mythological essence of life. Campbell wrote in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces* that the “woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known” (116). Thus, only women are as eternal and universal as the Witchblade and are capable of bonding with the artifact on an intimate, irreversible and even cellular level (cf. “Periculum” 1.07).

### **Irons as Sara Pezzini’s Nemesis and the Archetype of the Shadow**

Irons’ nemesis is not so much about retribution or vengeance, but about being a rival or opponent to Sara. However, in the beginning of the narrative he appears to be a helpful adviser in Sara’s quest for knowledge about the Witchblade. One could almost see him as an archetypal “wise old man,” except that Irons’ wisdom comes at a price:

Irons: I can help you, if you only let me. Teach you to use it, to control it, to become one with it. Don’t you see? Don’t you understand? This was meant to be. You were meant to find the Witchblade and I was meant to find you. Carpe diem, Sara. Seize the day. Choose the Witchblade ... it’s already chosen you.

The very obvious aim of Irons’ offer to help Sara is to gain control of the Witchblade by controlling Sara. Being wary of Irons, Sara refuses his help and thus denies him any control over her.<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless, the spiritual, even physical connection Irons has with the Witchblade, and subsequently, with Sara Pezzini underlines the idea that a nemesis figure is often intimately connected to the hero, that the nemesis “is really within us” (Grey 301). As we have seen in the quotation above, Irons’ attempt to wear the Witchblade himself has left him with the ability to “see some of what it sees, but not all” (Pilot Episode). But this link between Irons and Sara, maintained by the Witchblade goes further than mere glimpses of the supernatural power of the artifact. During the “Periculum” (1.07), the trial in which the Witchblade tests Sara’s worthiness as a wielder of the blade, Sara is physically controlled by the artifact. Across the city, separated by several miles, Irons does not only see, or feel Sara’s fear, but mirrors the same positions Sara is forced into by the Witchblade, on his office floor.

Even more disturbing to the audience, and to Sara, is the emotional connection Irons has to Sara through the Witchblade. When Sara experiences strong emotions, Irons seems to be

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<sup>162</sup> One could interpret this rejection of help from a male figure as a particular trait of the female action hero and her desire to remain independent. However, as Sara unworriedly relies on the help and wisdom of her partner Danny, this situation should not be read as gender-specific.

privy to them. In the pilot episode, for example, Sara has chased and battled a gangster whom she believes to be the murderer of her father. Intercut with the scenes that show Sara fight against the mobster Gallo, are short sequences in which the audience sees Kenneth Irons, standing at a window of his office building and obviously knowing what Sara is doing at that particular moment. Irons seems excited, even aroused by the adrenalin-laden struggle of the wielder. Apparently, the billionaire believes that once Sara has felt the power of the blade and used it to exact vengeance for her father she will be easier to control and to manipulate. Thus, Irons is disappointed, and perhaps even defeated to a certain extent, when Sara chooses not to kill the crime boss Gallo with the Witchblade, but to arrest him and to hand him over to the police.

The hero and her nemesis share a bond from which neither takes exceptional pleasure, but which each has to accept and live with. Here, the level of intimacy is particularly delicate as it is unwanted, but at the same time unavoidable. However, the enforced intimacy serves as a prerequisite for the struggle between justice and power embodied in the series by Sara and Irons respectively. In this context we can also discover qualities of the archetype of the Shadow in Irons. Irons represents the power that the Witchblade can give to its wielder. Several times Sara uses this power, for her own, very personal, purposes, for example when she kills five or more thugs who are responsible for the murder of her partner Danny Woo (cf. Pilot Episode). Often Sara is tempted to give herself over to the control of the Witchblade. However, the moral imperative of being a good police officer and upholding the law within her community regulates the actions of the detective. Sara fights to control the power of the Witchblade, and subsequently her own Shadow, manifested in the desire for the artifact's gift.

As already discussed above, a contemporary nemesis figure in popular entertainment is often very complex. Throughout the series the audience sees Irons as a soft-spoken, friendly man. In his encounters with Sara he behaves well-mannered, if slightly arrogant, but always polite. On the other hand, Irons displays a determined, ruthless personality. He is a man who uses his money to buy, control, or manipulate people. Irons' money, and the power which directly results from his wealth, elevate him to a social status where he considers himself to be standing outside the laws governing society. To challenge Irons' position as standing above human morals, the series employs the superhero Sara Pezzini. Sara Pezzini's role as a female superhero is to perceive the failure of justice as a problem of modern society, and to set it right: "In the absence of law, in the zone of indeterminacy, the superhero is forced to become the law" (Bainbridge 463). The function of Sara Pezzini

in negotiating and distributing justice will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent paragraphs. I have selected two episodes to analyze how notions of law and justice become an integral part of the series' narrative: "Parallax," (1.01) and "Transcendence" (1.11). Aside from ideas of revenge, justice, and good and evil, both episodes rely strongly on mythological symbols and images to discuss these values.

### **"Parallax" (1.01) and the "Black Dragons"**

Essentially, "Parallax" is a classic revenge story. The parties involved are "Moby," a veteran soldier and Kenneth Irons. Several years ago, Irons' company *Vorschlag Industries* partnered with the American government for a "special experimental warfare program," to produce supersoldiers. With the aid of psychotropic drugs and films that were designed to induce obedience and enhance aggression, a group of international servicemen was indoctrinated through extremely dangerous war games. The codename given to this project group was: the Black Dragons. In reference to this name, each member of this group has a tattoo of a black Chinese dragon on his neck.

Dragons are major symbols in legends and folklore of many societies. Depending on the cultural background, the dragon can symbolize a variety of meanings, aside from the very general notion of the dragon as a very strong and powerful being. Chinese dragons are usually considered to be wise and powerful creatures, rulers of water and weather, but mostly benevolent beings who distribute luck and personal happiness to people.<sup>163</sup> In contrast to the generous Chinese dragon, European folklore usually depicts the dragon as an aggressive and evil being. European dragon stories are most often connected to topics like war, battle and treasures. Hording gold, which they have stolen or been given as tribute or ransom, dragons are said to sleep on top of their treasures until a hero comes to slay them.<sup>164</sup> In the popular Arthurian legends, slaying a dragon is perceived as one of the most courageous deeds a knight can hope to accomplish. Usually, slaying a dragon goes together with saving a damsel in distress, i.e. a virgin/princess who has been offered to the dragon as a sacrifice, in return for the safety of the community. One of the most famous European stories in this context is the legend of St. George. This heroic knight slew a

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<sup>163</sup> A more detailed description of the dragon figure in Chinese mythology can be found in Marinus Villem de Visser's *The Dragon in China and Japan*).

<sup>164</sup> For European Dragons see: David E. Jones. *An Instinct for Dragons*. An overview over dragons from different cultures is provided by Charles Gould in *Mythical Monsters*.

monstrous dragon and freed the town of Silene<sup>165</sup> from the yoke of this evil beast. St. George's dragon, as most dragons in European folklore, can be interpreted as symbolizing an external threat to society. In the story, the dragon threatened the town of Silene and the king's daughter who was to be given to the dragon to appease it. Translated into cultural and social concerns of that time, the dragon stands for traditional pagan, or heathen practices on the British Isles; St. George represents the heroic liberating powers of Christianity in England. So if *WB* includes dragons in its narrative, these dragons are most certainly representative for contemporary anxieties in American culture and society.

Though the Black Dragons tattoo resembles a Chinese dragon the soldiers fit much more into the European tradition, in which dragons are directly related to war and battles.<sup>166</sup> Adding the word "black" to "dragons," further emphasizes the impression of the group as dealing in death and destruction. In the narrative, the supersoldiers are dangerous, because they are mentally unstable killing-machines. However, the immediate threat that these soldiers pose to society is only a symptom of a much bigger problem. The Black Dragons exemplify the result of unchecked, perverted power, more specifically, the destructive combination of government hubris and corporate greed. Thus this narrative stands in a long American tradition of mistrust of the government.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, the story of the Black Dragons includes the well-known literary motif of men trying to play God and failing miserably. Most famous among such stories would be, of course, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The ill-fated creature that was assembled by the scientist who took the power of creation into his own hands, eventually rebels against his maker and destroys him. We can see this storyline paralleled in "Parallax" when the leader of the Black Dragons, Hector Mobius, a.k.a "Moby," rises up against Kenneth Irons, the man who provided the government with the mind-altering substances to create supersoldiers. In all of this, Sara Pezzini is our St. George. She is the hero who has to bring justice to those who threaten society.

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<sup>165</sup> This town was situated in Lybia, as in this exotic locale the existence of dragons seemed possible. Other versions of the tale speak of a town called Lasia with an emperor by the name of "Selinus" (cf. Walter 109 ff.).

<sup>166</sup> In spite of the Chinese dragon tattoo, it is not possible to identify any direct influence of the Chinese symbolism on the "Black Dragons." As viewers, we could interpret the Chinese dragon to illustrate the intelligent power of the soldiers. This interpretation would coincide with a popular image of Eastern wisdom which has already been mentioned above.

<sup>167</sup> Gary Wills has outlined several instances throughout American history in which groups or individuals were distrustful of the American Government in his *A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government*.

Moby is literally a “black dragon.” He is a huge African-American man with prominently featured muscles. His whole outward appearance is that of a powerful and dangerous creature. However, Moby has been trained as a “poet warrior,” which implies the idea of a person who is very conscious of his emotions, and is able to express them. Thus, when Moby tends to speak in riddles and metaphors, we are being reminded of a widespread popular understanding of the exotic wisdom of the Chinese (dragons) and the art of composing poetry:

Moby:           The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, and the destructive  
                    sword are portions of eternity too great for the Iron Man.  
Sara:           Who is this?  
Moby:           A dead body avenges not injuries.

The figure of the “poet warrior” can be traced in mythological stories as well as American history. Celtic mythology, which has a tremendous influence on *WB* narratives includes the character of Oisín. Though his legends are not related to the story in “Parallax,” he is known as a poet and warrior with both vocations considered equally important (cf. Beresford Ellis 189 ff.). In American history, the poem “The Minstrel Boy” by Irish writer Thomas Moore, turned into song, has been a very popular tune since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The lyrics of the song tell the story of a bard and warrior who goes to war and is killed. Before dying, he destroys his harp in an act of defiance: “The Minstrel fell! But the foeman’s chain / Could not bring that proud soldier under; / The harp he lov’d ne’er spoke again, / For he tore its chords asunder;” (poemhunter). The minstrel and his harp symbolize freedom which is under threat from the enemies. Therefore, it is as tragic as it is justified, that the harp will not be strung by the enemy: “And said: ‘No chains shall sully thee, / Thou soul of love and brav’ry! / Thy songs were made for the pure and free, / They shall never sound in slavery” (ibd.). The song has often been sung by Irish-American soldiers during war, has been transported into popular American television culture, by *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Chief engineer Miles O’Brien sings the tune in *Star Trek: TNG*’s “The Wounded” (4.12) and it is frequently heard in relation to his character. The poet warrior Moby thus can be seen as standing for the honest and free American who fights for individual and public liberty against an uncontrollable enemy: an unjust government in collaboration with corporate America represented by Kenneth Irons.

The name “Moby” is, of course, also strongly reminiscent of Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, and one can see certain resemblances in the narrative of the book and the television episode. Even though the Moby in *WB* is not a huge white whale, but a huge “Black



Dragon,” the creatures referenced in the names are legendary, fearsome and overwhelming. Kenneth Irons is relatable to the monomaniacal Captain Ahab on a quest for the power of the Witchblade. Whereas in Melville’s novel, Ahab seeks revenge on Moby Dick for losing his leg, Moby in *WB* seeks revenge on Irons for losing his humanity. In both narratives, the question of what is right and what is wrong, who is good and who is evil, is of paramount importance. Is Moby evil, because he wants to kill Irons and accepts some collateral damage? Or is Irons evil, because he experimented on humans? Is Moby justified to seek revenge on Irons, or is Irons simply a tool, used by the government and cannot not be held responsible? To negotiate those issues, there is Sara, *WB*’s Starbuck. Instead of relying on Christian faith and principles, her set of rules by which she lives and evaluates her environment are the guidelines of the American justice system. Sara has been strongly influenced by her adopted father, who was a police officer, too. His ideas of law and justice are deeply ingrained within her conscious behavior. However, it is only when civilians are hurt and killed in the battle between Irons and the Black Dragons that Sara intervenes:

Sara: *(speaking to Irons)* I think that you were deeply involved in the Black Dragons program. I think that the last standing member other than Nottingham<sup>168</sup> has you in his crosshairs and I think Nottingham has systematically eliminated the rest of the unit. Now, I don't know what kind of private war you have going on here and I don't really care. I got two homicides and a wounded partner and if I were you, I'd be looking over my shoulder ... a lot. (“Parallax” 1.01)

If neither Ahab nor the whale, or Irons and Moby, respectively, had endangered the crew, Starbuck, or Sara, would not have had a reason to say or do anything. However, as Sara feels a responsibility to protect her society, she goes after Moby to bring him to justice, i.e., to jail, since the people she has sworn to protect and serve are hurt.

Towards the end of “Parallax” the authored image shows us an epic battle between Moby and Sara. Moby has gained entry into Irons’ well-guarded mansion, using the tactics he has been taught as part of his training as a supersoldier. Since he seems to be well aware of his mythological roots as a “black dragon,” Moby has procured a flamethrower with which he intends to destroy Irons and Nottingham. Moby’s reasoning is that he needs to “fight fire with fire,” considering the power of fire the only certain way to purge the world of Irons and his bodyguard. Wearing a protective mask, Moby’s resemblance to a

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<sup>168</sup> Ian Nottingham has also been a member of the Black Dragons. However, as he has been subjected to continuous influence from Irons and is loyal to him, Nottingham is less a threat to society than a victim of a cruel master.

mythological beast is stronger than ever. Sara, who has been guided by Irons and the Witchblade to Irons' home, appears just in time to take a stand against the dragon. The ensuing fight is clearly a fire-breathing dragon against a knight in shining armor.

When Moby directs his flamethrower against Sara, the Witchblade covers her with full body armor reminiscent of medieval knights. Walking through the flames, the image of Sara changing between her street clothes and metal armor strengthens the notion of the mighty knight who cannot be harmed by the evilness of the beast.

With the sword that the Witchblade artifact becomes, Sara is the perfect picture of a legendary knight fighting an overwhelmingly strong dragon. Interestingly, after observing Sara walking through his fire unharmed, Moby seems to acknowledge her superior power and does not attack her any further. Instead, he points the flamethrower towards Irons and Nottingham, and is eventually stabbed into his side by Sara. Severely wounded, Moby grabs the sword's hilt and drives it further into his own body. His dying words are revelation and warning: "You have the wrong dragon."

Though Sara might have eliminated a threat to society, and might have been justified in killing Moby as an act of self-defense, the victory does not seem satisfactory. Dangerous though he was, Moby was also a victim: a victim of his government and a victim of Irons' machinations. When Sara kills Moby, Irons seems immensely pleased and softly exclaims "Yes!" The question arises if Irons has manipulated both Moby and Sara to reach this point and to have Sara eliminate a grievous danger to him and the last evidence of his failed experiments. This becomes even more plausible when Irons quotes Moby saying: "A dead body revenges not injuries." The killer Moby might have been brought to justice, but the victim Moby will not see justice prevail. It is obvious that in cases where the perpetrator of a crime stands outside the law, the conventional legal system is not equipped to bring them to justice. In cases like these, the superhero needs to become "the law" (cf. Bainbridge 463) to achieve justice for society, as we will see in Sara's ultimate battle with Irons at the end of the episode "Transcendence" (1.11).

### **"Transcendence" (1.11) and the "White Bulls"**

Whereas in "Parallax" Sara had to battle Black Dragons, in "Transcendence" she is now pitted against the White Bulls. This last episode in the first season of *WB* resolves the storylines of the White Bulls, as well as Sara's relationship with her nemesis Irons, and sets up the second season of the show.

### The White Bulls

The White Bulls are a secret organization within the New York police force, surreptitiously sponsored and controlled by Kenneth Irons. This society is comprised exclusively of white, middle-class police men, who consider themselves as standing above the law, while using the power given to them by the state and city, to enrich themselves. Captain Bruno Dante,<sup>169</sup> the superior officer of Sara Pezzini, is the leader of this group. When he invites Jake McCarty, Sara's partner, to join the society, Dante explains that the White Bulls were founded because they believe that the authorized legal system is not always equipped to deliver justice to criminals. Thus they take it upon themselves to administer what they construe as justice. At times, this justice might even mean having to kill someone. To protect their actions in this delivery of just punishment, they use special bullets, engraved with a bull, so that members of the group know not to follow up on these executions:

Dante: When someone is obviously guilty and the system can't be trusted to administer justice, we use one of these bullets. Now, if you ever find a casing like this at a murder scene, just walk away. And if there's fruit to harvest, we take it. We watch each other's backs. ("Periculum" 1.07)

The symbol of the bull is generally understood as representing power, masculinity and virility. It is also a very ancient and widespread symbol. In cave drawings of Europe, Africa and the American continents, some as old as 40,000 years, we can find illustrations of animals which were of great importance to the people of those times. Among the illustrations, bulls or auerochsen, are some of the most prominently featured animals (cf. Heyd and Clegg or Curtis). Bulls have also been significant elements of many religions. In ancient Egyptian, Roman, Indian, Celtic, and various other European religions, a sacred bull, calf or cow had fixed places. Gods would appear in the shape of bulls, such as Zeus when he abducted Europa, and bulls were used as highly priced sacrifices. In the Old Testament the Golden Calf, the idol to which the people of Israel prayed while Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, epitomizes the abandonment of the right way. Similarly, the White Bulls have forsaken the justice system, which they had sworn to uphold, for their own personal benefit:

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<sup>169</sup> Though no association is ever mentioned in the series, the name "Dante" invokes Dante Alighieri and his *Divine Comedy*. Perhaps we could interpret Dante as the catalyst for Sara's journey to find her destiny, having to first travel through "hell," i.e., being the center of a conspiracy aimed at her death, "purgatory," i.e., her quest to bring down the "White Bulls," and finally reaching "paradise," when Dante is killed and Sara eventually finds her destiny.

Dante: Jake, what do you think happens to stolen money that we recover? Say, you know, drug money. After a trial?  
Jake: Never thought about it.  
Dante: It gets destroyed. Incinerated. Now why shouldn't it keep my dad out of a home or send your kid to NYU? Huh? Now, you wanna call that stealing? I don't.  
Jake: What do you call it?  
Dante: Justice. Balancing the scales. ("Periculum" 1.07)

The White Bulls thus illustrate a trope often used in American crime drama television: the corrupt cop. Analogue to the narrative concerning the Black Dragons above, the storyline of the White Bulls deals with particular anxieties in contemporary American culture: corruption and the abuse of power by the authority. The police are much closer to the community and its individual members, than abstract bodies such as the government or corporate organizations could ever be. Therefore, the abuse of power by police officers has a much more immediate impact on society and is of a deeper concern.

Coupled with the abuse of power by the "Bulls," the "White" denotes the secret society's political agenda. Whereas the color white can represent purity and innocence, "white purity," in turn, has often been utilized to rationalize the superiority of the white race in American history. Similar to the white robes of the Ku-Klux-Klan, or the "whiteness" of the Aryan Brotherhood and comparable groupings, the "white" in White Bulls stands for racially inferred supremacy.

While the proclaimed purpose of the White Bulls is to serve as an extension of the justice system, and standing in the tradition of the justified vigilante, this validation falls short, when it becomes clear that they do not care about the law at all, but only about their own, personal benefit. The members of the White Bulls take bribes from criminals, they execute people who threaten to expose their schemes and ignore the law when it suits them. Aside from being intrinsically racist, these male "bulls" are also extremely misogynistic. Women have no place in this "brotherhood."

In stark contrast to the corrupt policemen of the White Bulls, Sara Pezzini has built her life and her career on the moral imperatives of law and justice. She has internalized the spirit of justice based on the rules of her society. Because of these very strict ideas of what is right and what is wrong, Sara Pezzini becomes a nemesis figure to the White Bulls in the course of the narrative. So much so, that they frame her for crimes she did not commit which drives Sara into hiding. Her only allies are her partner Jake McCarty, who turns out to be an undercover FBI field agent investigating the White Bulls, and Gabriel Bowman, a friend who has helped Sara gathering knowledge about the Witchblade. Sara is determined

to bring Dante and the White Bulls to justice. In contrast to the secret organization, she believes in the validity of the American legal system:

Sara: I have to do this carefully. I have to do this right. I have to line up witnesses, gather evidence ... then I can go public. ("Convergence" 1.10)

Justice, for Sara, is provided by the law and the legal system which supplies the social norms regulating the behavior for any American citizen. However, helping the FBI and fighting for justice does not come without a price for Sara. The White Bulls demolish her beloved motorbike (cf. "Apprehension" 1.09), they kill Joe Siri, Sara's former captain and fatherly friend who knew about the secret society but never did anything about them (cf. *ibid.*), they attempt to assassinate Sara's friend Gabriel, and kill Ian Nottingham when he tries to protect Sara (cf. "Transcendence" 1.11). Though hunted by an overwhelming force, Sara never loses her dynamic agency. She collects evidence against the White Bulls and even breaks into Dante's house one night. At this point, Sara could kill Dante in his sleep and quite possibly get away with it. While Dante fully expects her to kill him, Sara only tells him that she is stronger than Dante and his cronies, drawing strength from being confident of her righteousness. Her actions further emphasize the importance of acting within the approved legal system:

Sara: Damn, Bruno. You wettin' the bed? See, I know you been trying to push me to the breaking point. But guess what, "Captain." I'm not going to break. You know what else? (*whispering*) I can take this a lot longer than you can. ("Convergence" 1.10)

In order to finally bring down the White Bulls, Sara and Jake lure Dante into a trap. In an abandoned building an FBI SWAT team is hiding to arrest Dante. During a stand-off between Dante, Jake and Sara, Dante admits that, among his other crimes, he was also responsible for putting out a hit on Sara's father. Dante has incriminated himself and is about to shoot Sara, when the FBI storms in and prepares to arrest Dante. Sara is content that she has delivered the White Bulls, especially their leader, to justice. The threat to society has been eliminated and the hero can reclaim her rightful place within her community, again. However, increasing the dramatic elements of the television show, while also focusing on the function of the hero and the nemesis figure to distribute justice, Sara needs to kill Dante when the White Bulls leader pulls a gun on Sara's partner McCarty and tries to shoot him in the back. In narratives of the American Wild West, only the most evil and cowardly people would shot someone in the back. Thus, with this loathsome action Dante has provoked his own death which now seems even more justified.

The man who has forsaken the true way, i.e., the legal system and the spirit of the law, and followed the “golden bull,” has lost the struggle between good and evil. Now, death seems to be the only satisfactory punishment for Dante’s inherent evilness, especially when he relishes in the fact that Sara will never find out who ordered the murder of her father: “You’re gonna have to chew on that for the rest of your life”. However, he does not have to tell Sara anything, as the Witchblade reveals the identity of the man behind the curtain: Kenneth Irons.

### **Kenneth Irons**

Consequently, Sara heads to Irons’ mansion for an ultimate confrontation with her nemesis. Irons stands for everything Sara opposes: he uses his power and his money to manipulate and abuse people, considering himself as standing outside the law and not accountable to anyone but himself. Righteous people fear Irons, because he is both powerful and impossible to overcome. In the *WB* narratives Irons functions as a symbol for a contemporary anxiety of being helpless in the face of such an accumulation of wealth and power. It is probable that Irons’ encounter with the Witchblade artifact has changed him from a merely ambitious entrepreneur into a power-hungry, megalomaniacal creature who uses his fellow human beings simply as resources for his own profit. For example, when Ian Nottingham is killed while protecting Sara from the White Bulls, Irons is less distraught than inconvenienced and orders Nottingham’s head to be brought to his house so that he can create a new clone of his henchman.<sup>170</sup> Thus, when Sara arrives at Irons’ home, the new Ian Nottingham, who is distinctly more ruthless and difficult to control, is already on site to fight as Irons’ champion. In “Parallax,” the character Moby told Sara “you have the wrong dragon.” At this point the truly dangerous dragon, Irons, has finally become visible. He is an overwhelmingly powerful creature who literally threatens to devour the knight, Sara. Irons needs Sara’s blood to survive. His contact with the Witchblade artifact has prolonged his life. However, the billionaire needs the blood of a wielder to sustain him.<sup>171</sup> He explains to Sara that her blood holds quasi-magical properties which will allow him to continue his existence and to keep his power:

Irons:           The Witchblade bonded with you on a cellular level, making your body a veritable fountain of new genetic material. You are the most

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<sup>170</sup> This particular storyline is examined in further detail in the following chapter.

<sup>171</sup> Similarities to vampire mythology and literary references, such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, will be discussed in the next chapter.

highly evolved life form on the planet. Your blood is invaluable, life-prolonging. ("Transcendence" 1.11)

The showdown between the Nottingham clone and Sara begins, when Nottingham breaks the neck of Sara's friend Gabriel without a direct order from Irons. The erstwhile master of the universe has lost his power. Frankenstein's creature rebels against his maker. Irons' own creation is now turning against him while his body and thus his strength, are noticeably deteriorating. Since Irons is completely helpless by this time, aging visibly, the physical battle takes place between Sara and the Nottingham clone. The Witchblade takes on the form of full body armor, giving the impression, once again, of Sara being the shining knight, fighting for righteousness against the Nottingham clone, who himself changes between an armored and unarmored form. This is very obviously a fight between a dark and a white knight. In this battle, the combatants represent the eternal struggle between good and evil. Sara manages to kill the Nottingham clone and moves towards Irons who pathetically begs her: "I'm dying, Sara. Help me. I can help you. Sara, please. ("Transcendence" 1.11).

Like an avenging knight Sara, still in full body armor, stands over Irons. Though the tip of her sword is aimed at Irons' heart, Sara does not stab him. If she did, the moral code that she, the superhero, represents would be violated. However, she does not try to help him by providing him with her blood. The evil wizard has miscalculated his power and lost. To let his unnatural existence come to an end means to let the world return to its natural state. In a final attempt to survive, Irons stabs Sara with a dagger when she turns away from him. Begging for Sara's blood Irons, once again, promises Sara knowledge about the Witchblade and her own life:

Irons:	Yes ... please.
Sara:	<i>(in a low voice)</i> Never.
Irons:	I will tell you everything.
Sara	I will find out for myself. ("Transcendence" 1.11)

The hero retains her agency, and overcomes an overwhelmingly powerful enemy. Sara withstands the temptations of her nemesis and her Shadow by consciously letting Irons die. Irons, who could not, or would not, be held responsible for his actions by conventional authorities, is finally brought to justice by the superhero. A supernatural adversary, such as Irons, requires a hero with supernatural powers to avenge the suffering of society. Consequently, Irons' death can be interpreted as a form of restorative justice, since only the loss of life can be seen as "symbolic reconstruction, as an acknowledgement of the victims' rights and as a form of compensation" (Messer, Baumer and Rosenfeld 559). In

this situation, Sara is in the unique position to embody two concepts of justice at once. She is a police officer, and thus represents the social and cultural expectations of this occupation: honesty, strength, integrity. But, Sara is also a superhero set against a powerful, supernatural creature. Thus she must also bring justice to the world on a much larger scale.

### **Nemesis in *Witchblade***

Kenneth Irons is the most complex yet inconspicuous nemesis figure we have seen so far. The hero, Sara, and her antagonist share a physical and spiritual bond provided by the Witchblade artifact. As long as Sara wears the Witchblade, whether in its dormant state as a bracelet, or activated as gauntlet, blade or full body armor, Irons is privy to Sara's emotions and even mirrors Sara's movements, when the Witchblade takes control of her body. This connection between the hero and her nemesis is unwanted, yet cannot be severed. It also seems to be one-sided, i.e., Irons may experience Sara's mental state, but not the other way around. The Witchblade has left an imprint on Irons when he attempted to wear it, but ultimately only women have the power to successfully control the artifact. Women in *WB* embody the ultimate force of life, they are both warriors and caretakers, and consequently singularly equipped to understand and harness the power which the Witchblade can provide. Sara's nemesis is the temptation to use the power of the Witchblade for her own benefit. She might want to avenge the murder of her father or her partner, but in using the artifact for personal gain, Sara is in danger of losing sight of her responsibility to "cure" a sick world (cf. "Periculum" 1.07). This is the Shadow, the power Sara could have, and her conscious decision to use the blade for good instead of evil.

Irons' function as a nemesis character is to negotiate concepts of law and justice in the series. Irons stands for individuals or organizations in American society that are so powerful that they seem to stand outside the law and cannot be touched and held responsible by the law-abiding citizens. As a representative of the people, detective Sara Pezzini believes in the validity of the legal system. When corrupt cops, such as the White Bulls, or mentally unstable supersoldiers threaten the community, Sara feels a responsibility to protect and serve. However, if the adversary has supernatural powers, a superhero is needed to deliver the justice, which cannot be reached by traditional law enforcement. Even though the validity of the American legal system is thoroughly endorsed throughout the series, a form of restorative justice (cf. Messer, Baumer and Rosenfeld 559), evident especially in the deaths of Dante and Irons is accepted as justified



and even normal in television series incorporating supernatural elements. Similar to the language of fairy tales, where the evil witch who manipulates and murders for her personal benefit is slain in the end, the audience understands that in a struggle between good and evil, the only possible outcome is the ultimate elimination of the villain.

## Conclusion

The nemesis figure has become a standard motif in American television narratives. In the three shows I have examined above, this particular motif serves two distinct functions. Firstly, of course, the nemesis character is the antagonist to the hero, i.e., a formidable rival or opponent (cf. Webster's). Standing in direct opposition, yet often intimate connection, to the hero, the nemesis figure also represents Jung's concept of the archetypal Shadow. This Shadow is an external projection of unwanted behavior, repressed desires, or immoral temptations which are part of the hero and need to be overcome by her. By overcoming her Shadow and consequently her nemesis, the hero offers ideas of moral and ethical standards which can be negotiated by the audiences.

Deliberating questions of particular values and norms within a community is the second function of the nemesis figure. The nemesis of the hero is utilized to discuss contemporary anxieties in American culture and society, such as abusive power by authorities, or mistrust of the government. The way in which the hero deals with her nemesis and the threat to society, which the nemesis represents, informs us about accepted or desired values with regard to the binary concepts of good and evil, but also more specifically, notions of justice and the validity of the American legal system at the time of the production of the series. All three shows are strongly supportive of the justice system represented by the police force, lawyers and courts. However, the female action heroes in the series' also stand in the tradition of the righteous vigilante, having to administer justice when villains cannot be reached and held accountable by normal law enforcement. The vigilante thus acts according to the "will of the community" (Zimring 89) instead of any written laws.

Vigilante justice is justified, when the villain stands outside of the law, either because of their social status, or because of supernatural powers. Such powers can only be countered by a hero with equal strengths. Consequently, the superhero has to determine what is right or wrong, what is good or evil (cf. Bainbridge 460). Mythological elements permeating the images and narratives of the series' helps the audience to comprehend the hero's struggle for justice on an internalized, even unconscious level. When the nemesis figure is ultimately killed by the superhero, this victory of good against evil happens on a meta-

level which is detached from any particular society and social restrictions and speaks to the viewers on an almost subliminal plane. In Jung's words, the shows use "primordial images," lifting ideas of good and evil, revenge, justice, and forgiveness "out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever enduring" (Campbell, *Portable Jung* 321). The authored image "transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, and evokes in us all those beneficent forces that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find a refuge from every peril and outlive the longest night" (ibid.).

## Chapter 6: Classic Myths and Archetypes and their Functions III: “Never give up, never surrender!” – The Myth of Death & Rebirth and American Optimism

When you're sad and when you're lonely  
And you haven't got a friend  
Just remember that death is not the end.  
And all that you held sacred  
Falls down and does not mend  
Just remember that death is not the end.  
Not the end, not the end  
Just remember that death is not the end

...

For the tree of life is growing  
Where the spirit never dies.  
And the bright light of salvation  
Up in dark and empty skies.  
When the cities are on fire  
With the burning flesh of men  
Just remember that death is not the end.

Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds *Death is not the End*

Having to face death, whether your own or a loved one's, is a trying task for most people. As already mentioned above, to many people in Western civilization death is a taboo topic. However, in mythology death, especially if followed by a rebirth, often symbolizes something hopeful, speaking of transformation, regeneration, of renewal and of a better future (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 51). The ardent belief in a better future coupled with an unrelenting optimism has been part of the American character since the arrival of the first colonists on the shores of today's Massachusetts and Virginia.<sup>172</sup> Connecting death with optimism may seem to be a rather difficult feat. However, in many American television programs which incorporate mythological elements, such as *BtVS* or *XWP*, death is only another challenge life throws at you to overcome. Thus, in the following chapter I am going to examine patterns of mythical death and rebirth situations in the three selected television shows and illustrate how their narratives emphasize ideas of not giving up and the firm belief in a better future. After discussing the concept of optimism in American culture, I will shortly reflect on the mythological motifs of death and rebirth, before starting analysis on selected episodes from *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*.

### Optimism

“Yes, we can” was President Barack Obama's thunderous slogan during his presidential campaign in 2008. Taken (possibly) from the children's television show *Bob the Builder*, who frequently uses this upbeat motto when starting construction together with his

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<sup>172</sup> The most common expression of this belief in success and a better future can be seen in the concept of the American Dream (cf. Adams, Cullen, Freese). Colonists in Jamestown believed that they would find gold and other treasures and achieving financial wealth (cf. Smith). In Massachusetts the better future lay in the freedom of being able to create a new form of religious and social community (cf. Winthrop, Vaughan).

machinery friends,<sup>173</sup> this catchphrase has become a household term, not only in the United States, but in many parts of the Western world. Furthermore this maxim is a prime example of an optimism, which has often been seen as a unique trait of the American character. In 1950 Henry Steele Commager claimed that “nothing in all history had succeeded like America and every American knew it” (5). More elaborate, progressive theorist Herbert Croly for example stated in 1965: “[Americans] believe that somehow and sometime something better will happen to good Americans ... The future will have something better in store for them individually and collectively than has the past or present” (3). Between the 1970s and the 1990s we can observe a decrease in this affirmative optimism, when for example 54% of Americans were “not confident at all” that their children would have a better life than they had (cf. Ulslander 447). However, with the presidency of Barack Obama, I would argue, optimism returned once more to American life. Carrying on his positive attitude of the “Yes, we can” slogan, Obama’s speeches are filled with words of hope, optimism and greatness:

We remain a young nation, but in the words of the Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness ... Those values upon our success depends – honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism ... What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility – a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. (Obama, Inaugural Speech, 2009)

Obama links success and optimism with hard work, reflecting on the protestant work ethic which arrived in the American colonies with the Pilgrims and the Puritans of old.<sup>174</sup> Evidently, the ardent belief that if you work hard you will succeed, is still very much an

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<sup>173</sup> Bob the Builder usually asks his friends: “Can we do this?” to which they enthusiastically reply “Yes, we can!”

<sup>174</sup> A particularly good example of the belief that hard work will lead to a rich and satisfying life is Benjamin Franklin’s autobiographical book *Poor Richard’s Almanack* in which he describes a lifestyle for the average American that will make them financially and intellectually successful.

American ideal. Obama's Address to the Joint Session of Congress in February 2009 once again emphasized the greatness of the American people that comes from permanent toil:

We will rebuild, we will recover and the United States of America will emerge stronger than before ... The weight of this crisis will not determine the destiny of this nation. The answers to our problems don't lie beyond our reach. They exist in our laboratories and universities, in our fields and our factories, in the imaginations of our entrepreneurs and the pride of the hardest-working people on Earth. Those qualities that have made America the greatest force of progress and prosperity in human history we still possess in ample measure. What is required now is for this country to pull together, confront boldly the challenges we face, and take responsibility for our future once more (Obama, Address to Congress, 2009)

A poll taken by CNN/ORC after Obama's address showed that the President's words of optimism resounded in the nation: "Eighty-five percent of respondents to the CNN/ORC poll said Obama's speech made them feel more optimistic. This expression of optimism in the face of current economic conditions is impressive. It is also uniquely American" (Karlyn Bowman). Nevertheless, the road to success and a better future will only open up if sweat and labor are invested. This idea gives all agency to the individual. By controlling their work, they control their future: "[o]ptimists believe that they have control over their own destinies" (Seligman, quot. in: Uslaner 448). This belief in controlling one's own destiny and through effort being able to change one's personal situation is firmly embedded in *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*. However, before finding examples for this claim, I will shortly consider some thoughts on mythological patterns of death and rebirth.

### **The Ancient Myth of Death and Rebirth**

The tales of gods, heroes, or great leaders of people, dying only to be reborn, whether in their own bodies or their powers transferred into another form, are as old as the first societies on this earth. Frazer talks of civilizations and tribes, ranging from the ancient Babylonians to African tribes and Scandinavian societies, in which the idea of the killing and restoration of the divine king was an essential part of the natural order (cf. Frazer, "The Killing of the Divine King"). Sometimes a king was killed at the first sign of weakness, such as sickness or old age, since on the health and vigor of the king depended "the fertility of men, of cattle, and of vegetation" (ibid. 2). In other societies the end of the reign of a king was predetermined, to prevent even the slightest "symptom of decay" (ibid.

3). Scandinavian societies appear to have found a slightly more regent-friendly solution for the ritual regeneration of the sovereign, and his country: “of old the Swedish king reigned only for periods of nine years, after which they were put to death or had to find a substitute to die in their stead” (ibid.). Even when the death of the ruler was not an absolute necessity, rituals of cyclical restoration for the benefit of king and country were common in many societies throughout the world.

This idea of a renewal of life on earth, often in connection with the seasonal cycle of autumn/winter and spring (cf. Frye, 169), has found a fixed place in narratives of mythology, e.g., the legend of Demeter and Persephone and folklore, in stories of an ailing king who needs to be healed (cf. Frye, 183). In his extensive work on theories of literary criticism, *Anatomy of Criticism*, in which he uses archetypal criticism as a methodological principle, Northrop Frye corresponds four different genres of literature: Comedy, Romance, Tragedy, and Irony/Satire with the four seasons of the year: Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. To him the continuous cycles of the divine, the human, the animal, vegetable and mineral world, are the foundations of literature; literature itself being “the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate” (ibid. 184). The number four is in itself symbolic to life: “the four seasons of the year, being the type for four periods of the day (morning, noon, evening, night), four aspects of the water-cycle (rain, fountains, rivers, sea or snow), four periods of life (youth, maturity, age, death), and the like” (ibid. 160). According to Frye, the cycles which determine human life are prerequisite to progress: “the fundamental form of process is cyclical movement, the alternation of success and decline, effort and repose, life and death which is the rhythm of process” (ibid. 158).

The archetypal hero in literature often has to go through the stages of death and rebirth in order to achieve progress: “the hero has to enter the body of death, the hero has to die, and if his quest is completed the final stage of it is, cyclically, rebirth, and dialectically, resurrection” (Frye 192). However, the hero does not only achieve catharsis and regeneration for himself, but for the society which he/she represents: “the new human body is both a hero and a social group” (ibid. 215).

To Joseph Campbell death and rebirth of the archetypal hero of mythical narrative can happen in numerous stages and versions throughout the quest journey. Often the cycle of dying and regeneration is more of spiritual than physical nature: “a rite, or a moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth” (Campbell, *Hero* 51). When the hero willingly travels through a “passage of the magical threshold” (ibid. 90), i.e., is challenged by overpowering forces and seems to have disappeared, this too can

be an expression of a transition from life to death and resurrection: “the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation ... but here, instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again” (ibid. 91). Like Frye, Campbell sees the value of the hero’s deeds not only as a means of self-betterment, but the hero is an integral part of a particular society for which he/she struggles. Having overcome his/her fears and desires during the journey, the hero can return to his community and pass on the knowledge he/she has gained: “the hero is now ready to obtain that which he has set out, an item or new awareness that, once he returns, will benefit the society that he has left” (ibid. 190).

What we can conclude from the examinations of the three scholars mentioned, is that the pattern of death and rebirth is never solely focused on one individual, but must always be seen in context of the society from which the individual has come forth and to which he/she will return eventually. We should also keep in mind that, as the song lyric quoted above put it so very bluntly: “Death is not the End.” Though we have taken our clues from literature so far, the application of our findings to television series does not require much adaptation. Indeed, in the following paragraphs I am going to conjoin the mythological aspects of dying and rebirth with notions of American Optimism and resilience as exemplified by selected episodes of *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*.

## **6.1 Defeating Hell ... and Heaven – Commanding Death in Xena: Warrior Princess**

Xena, the Warrior Princess is no stranger to death. Having laid waste to the known world as “The Destroyer of Nations,” Xena has dealt out death countless times. But even dying herself is not unfamiliar to the Warrior Princess. Throughout the six seasons of the show Xena dies and comes back to life again, several times (cf. “The Quest” 2.13; “The Ides of March” 4.23; “Looking Death in the Eye” 5.19). On other occasions we could even say that Xena gets up close and personal with death, for example, when in the episode “Death in Chains” (1.09) Xena and Gabrielle have to save Death personified, i.e., Hades’s (fictitious) sister Celesta. Celesta has been kidnapped by the evil king Sisyphus who wants to cheat death and live forever. Holding a candle, which symbolizes both the passing of time and the passing of life, Celesta touches and thereby transfers humans from the realms of the living to the realms of the dead. However, the problem which soon becomes apparent is that without Celesta nobody is able to die and cross over which is especially a problem for terminally ill or fatally injured people. Thus, Hades, the Greek god of the underworld himself comes topside to ask Xena for help to restore order to the world. Interestingly, the somewhat polemic message of this episode, which is based on an actual Greek myth, is that death is a useful and necessary part of life. By personifying death and presenting her as a beautiful and friendly young woman, innocent in a white dress, the whole topic is easy to understand, especially for the younger audiences of the family show.

From all the other stories dealing with death, or better, the death of the main protagonist of the show, Xena, there are two story arcs which lend themselves particularly well to an examination of combining mythical patterns of death and rebirth with an American spirit of optimism and buoyancy. One of them is set in Greece and Rome and the other in ancient Japan.<sup>175</sup> Even though the episodes playing in the Far East are very interesting for their Westernized depiction of old Japanese culture, religion and society, I will examine the other storyline for a number of reasons. First of all, as the action takes place in ancient Greece and Rome, the cultural background is much closer to Western or better American notions of mythological and historical identification than the Far East. Secondly, the episodes “Ides of March” (4.21) and “Fallen Angel” (5.01), involve mythological figures

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<sup>175</sup> These episodes have shortly been mentioned above in chapter 3.2.2.



of angels and demons, which are concepts to which the majority of the audience will more easily relate, than an exotic world of spirits comparatively unknown to viewers.

### Characters and Setting

In order to place the narrative of “Ides of March” (4.21) and “Fallen Angel” (5.01) in the context of the series, I will give a short overview of where the characters are in terms of geographical setting, but also in terms of personal development and relationships. Aside from the main protagonists, Xena and Gabrielle, a number of other recurring characters are important for this story arc. First, we have the historical figure Julius Caesar, who has a very particular place in Xena’s life. According to the background narrative of the series, Xena, while she was still a warlord bent on conquering the world, and the young Roman officer Julius Caesar were once allies and lovers. However, Caesar betrayed Xena and had her crucified (cf. “Destiny” 2.12). Ever since, Xena has tried to get revenge and kill Caesar. Another significant character in these two episodes is Callisto, archenemy and nemesis to Xena, as we have explored in detail above (cf. chapter 5.2). Callisto has modeled her life after Xena, the warlord, ever since Xena and her army attacked Callisto’s village when Callisto was a little girl who watched her parents and sister die (cf. “Callisto” 1.22). From that time on Callisto has developed such a passionate hatred of Xena that her mental stability has suffered profoundly. Both Xena and Gabrielle have had to endure physical and spiritual cruelty at the hands of Callisto.<sup>176</sup> It is perhaps interesting to note that Callisto, too, has died and returned to the world of the living a number of times throughout the first five seasons of *XWP* (cf. “Return of Callisto” 2.05). The last character I would like to mention at this point is a spiritual teacher named Eli.<sup>177</sup> An old friend of Xena and Gabrielle, Eli has taught Gabrielle the “way of love,” i.e., a way to live in peace with herself and her environment. As much as some of the show’s writers have protested to the contrary,<sup>178</sup> the character of Eli is a messianic, Jesus-like figure with powers of healing derived from love and prayers to his “father.” Though a common first name in the Hebrew language, the word “Eli” can also mean “my God” as spoken in Arabic, Hebrew or Aramaic, and is, in fact, used by Jesus on the cross. A further meaning of “Eli” is “the highest” or “to the highest.” Aside from the linguistic connotation, Eli is a character from

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<sup>176</sup> For example in episode “Return of Callisto” (2.05) where Callisto viciously murders Gabrielle’s husband Perdicus.

<sup>177</sup> Eli has shortly been introduced above in chapter 5.2.

<sup>178</sup> Cf. Writer R.J. Stewart has claimed this in an interview on the DVD concerning “Fallen Angel” (5.01); it was also mentioned above.

the Christian bible, where he was a high priest and teacher to Samuel (cf. *Easton's Bible Dictionary*). Therefore, to renounce any association of the character Eli with Christian mythology, as the writers of *XWP* have done, appears rather unconvincing.

As already mentioned above, the setting of the story arc switches from ancient Greece and Rome to a more metaphysical realm of the afterlife. Here, the show leaves behind the terminology known from Greek mythology, speaking of Tartarus and the Elysian Fields, but progresses into Christian mythology, featuring heaven and hell, angels and demons, concepts deeply ingrained in American culture. Signifying perhaps a wider variety, or at least influences in contemporary religious beliefs, references to “karma” and rebirth in the sense of the Hinduist faith are strewn into the narrative.

### **Death, Rebirth and Controlling Fate**

The story of “Ides of March” opens to a destitute Callisto crouching in squalor in what we soon learn to be a hell dimension of sorts. Apparently, the “lord of hell” who is never explicitly named, is afraid that Xena might slip out of his grasp due to her continuing efforts to redeem herself. Even though Xena’s prospects might not be an afterlife in Paradise, it is likely that “she’ll be born ... higher up the karmic ladder” (Unknown Man in hell dimension, “Ides of March”). It is interesting that while ideas of hell and heaven, in the Christian sense, are established in this and the following episodes, these two concepts are only two of many possibilities of an afterlife. The certainty that there is, in fact, an afterlife, however, is never questioned. As we have seen above (chapter 5.2), Christian concepts are significant guidelines for the narratives of *XWP*. Thus, the firm belief in a continuation of the soul, if not the body, highlights the permeation of Christian principles in contemporary American culture.

Seething with the unfairness of the situation, and not one to let an opportunity pass, Callisto offers her services to “the lord of hell” to bring her archenemy down: “You tell him, if he wants her here, I’m the woman for that job.” Thus Callisto is the first to show us that hope fuels optimism, even if the outlook is more than bleak. Callisto grabs the opportunity to work together with the master of the demons to make sure Xena will spend eternity in hell and not be reborn as a better creature. Diluting Christian ideas of the binaries heaven and hell, people in the Xenaverse can also be reborn. This very clearly shows that in contemporary American culture mythological concepts are easily transferred from one belief system to another. Much like the idea of “fusion food,” where ingredients from various cuisines of the world are brought together to create new palates, we can speak

of “fusion faith,” or perhaps “fusion mythology,” in which people pick those parts of a religion or myth they like and create new meanings with those pieces. It would be interesting to further examine if indeed we can see more evidence of a blurring of boundaries of religious mythology in American culture, while at the same time fundamentalist believers are making headlines as well. Unfortunately, such an excursion would lead us too far away from our initial task and cannot be undertaken here.

Callisto’s task is to stop Xena from getting to Caesar, who has put up a reward of six million dinars to anyone who delivers Xena to him: dead or alive. Upon hearing of this, the reformed warlord is eager to put an end to the long feud between herself and Caesar by killing him once and for all. The situation is problematized by the fact that Xena has had a vision in which she saw Gabrielle and herself being crucified by the Romans. Thus, Gabrielle asks her friend not to go into the lion’s den and challenge Caesar:

- Xena:           *We’re* not doing anything. *I’m* going to Rome, not you. Gabrielle, I can’t take you. Not after that vision.
- Amarice:       What vision?
- Xena:           I had a vision once that ... Gabrielle and I would die at the hands of Romans. It’s bad enough that we can run into Romans anywhere, but if you and I were to go to Rome...
- Gabrielle:      Ok. Well, what if I ask you not to do this?"
- Xena:           Gabrielle, he’s an evil man, and he’s trying to kill me. I *have* to take him out or die trying. It’s the way of the warrior. (emphasis Xena)

It is interesting to observe that Xena in this situation both believes in destiny and at the same time does not. She has accepted that her salvation from past crimes lies in physically fighting for the greater good, and yet refuses to believe that the vision she had leads her to a particular destiny. In this behavior we can very nicely observe the optimistic conviction that one is always able to control one’s own life to achieve a positive outcome. Especially, if one is determined to work, or, in this case, fight for it. This confidence in the ability to control her own life does not even leave Xena, when Gabrielle is captured by some Romans and brought to a prison, which looks suspiciously like the place where, in Xena’s vision, the two heroes died on the cross. Notions of individualism and optimism are discernible when Callisto offers Xena to prevent the vision from coming true if Xena does not murder Caesar. Xena does not accept this deal, as she (from experience) mistrusts Callisto and is certain to be able to change the envisioned future through her own cunning and strength. Xena lets herself be captured and is brought to her imprisoned friends, where she proceeds to free them in order to escape. Xena is still convinced that she will be able to determine her destiny and that of her friends, assuring Gabrielle: “Listen. That vision is not

going to happen, all right?” However, the prison break goes awry when in a fight Xena’s spine is broken (by her own weapon, wielded by Callisto) and she is unable to continue the battle. Gabrielle and Xena eventually are crucified and die.

The symbolism here is important. Xena and Gabrielle are crucified, thus evoking images of Christ. In terms of mythology, what we can see here is the somewhat akin to the “killing of the divine king” (cf. Frazer). The weak king, or hero, dies to ensure the continued prosperity of his community. He is reborn in the new king, to renew the world. But is that the reason Xena and Gabrielle die? It seems that the preordained death of the heroes is almost arbitrary and serves no greater purpose. However, while Xena and Gabrielle die on the cross, Caesar is killed by the senators who oppose the plan of the general to proclaim himself emperor of the republic. Before getting captured Xena had advised Brutus of the political aspirations of Caesar and thus facilitated the eventual murder of Caesar. Intercut with images of Xena and Gabrielle dying on the cross are shots of Caesar being stabbed to death in the Senate. Thus we can very well interpret Xena’s death as a sacrifice so that the world can be changed into a better place. It is also a personal victory. Even though Xena dies, her revenge on Caesar has been completed.

We can also see Frye’s theories manifested in this situation. When Xena and Gabrielle are crucified, the environment is bleak and stony, and it is winter. Snow is covering the ground. We have entered the season of winter, the irony of Xena dying on the cross in order to exact her revenge on Caesar. If we accept Frye’s idea that in order to achieve progress “the hero has to die” only to be reborn again (cf. Frye, *Anatomy* 192), then we can say Xena and Gabrielle die to achieve progress. Progress for their community, by getting rid of Caesar, but also personal progress, as the heroes transcend death and head for new adventures in a different realm: heaven. In terms of Campbell, we could speak of an Apotheosis that the heroes reach, once they have gone “beyond the last terrors of ignorance” and ascend to a “divine state” (Campbell, *Hero* 151).

As already mentioned several times, the writers and creators of *XWP* claim that they use terminology such as heaven/hell and angel/demons on a non-religious level. Writer R.J. Stewart has stated that these ideas are so secularized in contemporary (television-) culture that they can easily be used outside a particular Christian context (cf. Interview with R.J. Stewart, Bonus Features, DVD *XWP* Season Five, Disc One). Indeed the show never explicitly says “God” or “Devil”, and only references the existence of these higher powers

indirectly.<sup>179</sup> However, when the writers use classical Christian imagery and terminology, such as introducing brightly haloed angels with feathery wings, “archangels” going by the name of Michael and Raphael, or talking about one of the angels having rebelled and as a consequence having been expelled from paradise, then we are very clearly in the realm of Christian mythology. What the show does not do, however, is to assign any Christian values to the traditional religious meaning of the images and symbols they use. In terms of story, angels and demons function primarily as images to symbolize the mythical battle between good and evil, as archangel Michael explains:

Michael:        There’s a war going on. Between good and evil. Not only on earth, but here, in eternity as well. Once there were only angels. And then one of our number rebelled, and he and his allies were thrown down from heaven. They have never given up the desire to recapture paradise, and twist it into their image.

Thus, although the Biblical story of Lucifer being unhappy with conditions in heaven and consequently being removed to hell is well known to a Western audience with a cultural background in Christianity, the events described by Michael transcend any particular religious prescription. Instead they can be understood by anyone, since ideas of a dichotomy of good and evil are part of every culture and society.

For the narrative it is also important that the audience understands that evil people will go to hell and good people will go to heaven after death. Thus, when the “good” character Gabrielle gets kidnapped by demons and is taken to hell, the audience instinctively knows that this is wrong and something has to be done about it. In this conviction they will probably agree with the hero, Xena, who finds it ridiculous that a good soul like Gabrielle’s should be doomed to an eternity in hell. Xena is told by the archangel Michael that saving Gabrielle is the responsibility of himself and his brothers. The archangels, represented exclusively by attractive, well-muscled men, are the champions of heaven, outfitted with plate armor, shining swords and impressive dark wings. However, Xena refuses to let others do the job that she feels is hers alone:

Xena:            She has to be rescued.  
Michael:        That’s the responsibility of the archangels.  
Xena:            No! It’s *my* responsibility.

As a hero it is, of course, Xena’s task to save her friend from hell. As a character of an American television series, she relies on herself, on her skills and the unshakable

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<sup>179</sup> For example, in “Fallen Angel” (5.01) when Callisto keeps referring to “him”, or “my lord”, as the master of hell who has send her to get Xena off the path of redemption.

conviction that she can get the job done. When Xena is informed by Michael that the only creatures that have an actual chance against demons are archangels, Xena is not intimidated, but simply decides to become an archangel herself. This turn of the narrative is interesting on two levels. Firstly, it shows that faith may be good, but self-reliance is even better (cf. Emerson "Self-Reliance"). Xena does not shrink from a seemingly impossible situation, but is determined to control her own destiny and in consequence that of her loved ones. Secondly, it is once again evidence of the changing role of women in television, as well as in culture. The biblical stories exclusively mention male angels, especially archangels. In the show, so far, we have seen female guardian angels, but only male, warrior-type, archangels. Now, Xena becomes the first female archangel. This can be interpreted as a sign for the strength of the character and the value that is assigned to the female gender in the narratives of *XWP*.

In order to become an archangel, Xena needs to undergo a trial. In Campbell's terms this is once again a situation where the archetypal hero has to pass a threshold: "the passage of the magical threshold is a transit to a sphere of rebirth" (*Hero* 90). This threshold is often represented by an unknown and frightening place. In "Fallen Angel" Michael directs Xena towards some caves which will test Xena:

Xena:           What's in there?  
Michael:       A choice.

Not entirely happy with Michael's answer, Xena ventures forward and is now faced with two cave entrances. In the one cave we can see walls of fire emerging from the ground, the other entrance is obscured by a waterfall. The camera lingers and zooms in on the cave with the flames, heralding Xena's choice. Meanwhile the archangels wait for Xena by a pool of water, voicing their concern that Xena's absence has already been too long. Just then Xena walks out of the cave, dressed in a white gown, but completely enveloped in flames, which, however, do not seem to hurt a calm Xena. She steps into the pool, while Michael proudly proclaims:

Michael:       (to Xena, now an archangel) You've walked through the fire of purification. Now, as the divine water sanctifies your existence, your cleansing is complete.

Xena submerges into the waters, the flames sizzling out. When she re-emerges from the pool, Xena is clad in full archangel gear, plate armor and spectacular wings.

Interestingly, the wings of an archangel are not white, but black, and thus emphasize the belligerent image of these warriors. The dramatic change from rescued soul to archangel is

once again full of Christian imagery. The cave of flames can be identified as a place of purgatory, i.e., a place where the soul is purified through fire. After the purification, the submerging into the pool of water is a symbol for a renewal of life through baptism. Biblical stories of John the Baptist tell us that he used to fully submerge those willing to change their lives and their faiths into the river Jordan. Xena stepping into the waters while angels are waiting for her return is an even stronger image of the process of initiation. Especially, since she is not “baptized” by anyone, but walks through fire and water completely self-reliant and on her own. Consequently, we can say that Xena has been through purgatory to be cleansed and is reborn as a different, stronger person. Mythologically, she has overcome the elements of fire and water and has become hardened, as a sword which is forged in fire and tempered in water.

Before the archangels set out to rescue Gabrielle, Xena is warned that now, being “purified and full of compassion” (Archangel Michael), she might be tempted to save Gabrielle’s soul. If she succumbs to this temptation she will be doomed to take Gabrielle’s place in hell. This is not exactly what happens, but, once in hell, Xena is so touched by Callisto’s pain, that the hero gives “her light,” i.e., the goodness within herself, to her erstwhile nemesis in order to save her. As a result, Xena becomes a demon, and soon rises to leadership among the creatures of hell. In a somewhat twisted way, we can still observe a particular kind of optimism in these events. Instead of despairing over her fate, Xena takes charge of her existence, as well as of the demons around her, and plans for the future (which basically entails raiding and taking over heaven).

Meanwhile back in heaven, Gabrielle, having been saved by the angels from hell and informed as to what has happened to Xena, mirrors Xena’s determination and actions from before, in that now Gabrielle becomes an archangel to save her friend from hell, even when Michael tells her that Xena is beyond saving:

Michael:        You understand there’s no saving Xena. The only way to stop her is to cut her up ... and let her spend the rest of eternity in pieces.  
Gabrielle:       If that’s what it takes.

Both protagonists are not deterred from pursuing a heroic course of action, i.e., to save their friends from what they perceive to be an unjust fate. In this they act in a distinctively optimistic manner:

Optimists, as compared with pessimists, are more likely to persist in their pursuit of goals when confronted with difficult life situations. Optimists take advantage of the

opportunities for development to a greater extent than pessimists do. Optimists might also cope more effectively when goals are blocked. (Wrosch and Scheier, 64)

After Gabrielle has been purified, baptized and thus has become an archangel, she sets out to fight Xena, the demon. In a campy, computer animated, pinkish version of a middle ground between heaven and hell, Xena's and Gabrielle's battle, the battle between demon and angel, symbolizes, not terribly subtly, the eternal struggle of good against evil.

For the audience, the situation is emotionally gripping, as they wish the heroes to continue their adventures together. However, as the episode "Fallen Angel" (5.01) is the opener for the fifth season of the show, we can assume that neither of the main protagonists will meet an untimely end in this fight.

Eventually, the situation is saved by Callisto, now an angel, and Eli, the Christ-like teacher of peace and love, and friend of Gabrielle and Xena's. Eli, at this point in the narrative, is desperate, feeling responsible for the death of Xena and Gabrielle, assuming his ideas of being non-violent and "loving thine enemy," have weakened the two heroes to such an extent that they were captured and crucified by the Romans. In a slightly overstated affirmation of these ultimately Christian values, i.e., that indeed, through love a better life can be achieved, the angel Callisto appears within the crypt where Xena and Gabrielle's bodies have been laid out by their friends, and announces:

Angel Callisto:	Eli. Love <i>is</i> the way. Go to them ("Fallen Angel" 5.01, emphasis Callisto)
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Together, Eli and Callisto raise Xena and Gabrielle from the dead, laying on hands and praying over their lifeless bodies, and thus saving them from a destiny of constant battle in the afterlife.

In the process of resurrecting the two heroes, Callisto uses the opportunity to magically gift Xena with a child, i.e., when Xena returns to life, she is pregnant with a daughter. As already discussed above (chapter 5.2), the similarities to the Christian story of the Immaculate Conception are more than obvious. However, significantly, the power which bestows life in this situation is not a male god, but a female angel. In consequence, not only are the two heroes reborn, but another hero's birth is initiated. According to Campbell's examinations of hero figures, this unborn child is destined to become yet another champion for humanity, since already the inception of the child is miraculous, as will be the childhood, and a predestination of a heroic life (cf. *Hero*, 318 ff.). With Xena's daughter Eve, this destiny will come true later in the narrative (cf. chapter 5.2).



The resurrection of the protagonists is significant on several levels. On the religious plane we have two figures closely connected to Christian mythology, an angel from heaven and a messianic figure, Eli, who have the power to bring people back to life. Reminiscent of the biblical story of Lazarus, in which Jesus uses his divine powers to restore the life of a man four days dead, the Christian connotations are unmistakable. The insistence on “love” as the way to peace and a fulfilled life, though rooted in Christian faith, is used as an expression of optimism in a distinctively American cultural context. Supported by this Christian framework, *XWP*’s message of harmony seems to be well in accord with the series’ targeted audience: families, children and young adults. From a social and cultural perspective, we can conclude that American audiences expect family shows such as *XWP* to transport desired values like tolerance, peace, and a loving attitude towards fellow human beings. However, the moral standards which are reiterated in *XWP* often can only be achieved by fighting for them. Consequently, in order to uphold a strict coding of “right” and “wrong”, violence may be an acceptable, perhaps even necessary mechanism to achieve a particular notion of “peace.” Whether the hero is an American frontiersman, a Western-style “peacekeeper”, or a fictional Greek warrior; the idea of using force as an instrument for political decisions may not be uniquely American, but has a strong tradition in U.S. politics, historically, and contemporary.

Considering the mythological aspects of this particular death and rebirth scenario in *XWP*, we can once again detect several references to the trial of the “divine king”. Xena and Gabrielle are killed at a point in the narrative, when both are weak. Gabrielle has renounced her fighting abilities for Eli’s “way of love” and Xena, who has chosen the “way of the warrior,” has been paralyzed in combat, and is thus rendered unable to continue fighting. We can interpret these events, in accordance with Frazer, as a “killing of the divine king” (cf. ch. XXIV). Though Xena is not necessarily a divine entity (we can argue she becomes one when she transforms into an archangel later on), she does have supernatural abilities and thus qualifies for this position. When Xena dies, she does so in order to “renew” and to strengthen society, because her death also means the death of Julius Caesar, who has become a megalomaniacal leader and a threat to his community (cf. *XWP* “Ides of March” 4.21). Before being reborn, both Xena and Gabrielle have gone through a trial of catharsis and regeneration, in the realms of heaven and hell, which corresponds with Campbell’s concept of the “Apotheosis of the Hero” (cf. *Hero* 150 f.). Back in the world of the living, Xena and Gabrielle have obtained a new level of clarity

about their respective objectives in life, as well as their relationship, which the audience is certain to appreciate:

Gabrielle: We're going to be together ... for eternity.  
Xena: Yeah.

This rather mono-syllabic answer of the hero nevertheless contains a great amount of optimism. Neither death, nor the afterlife can change the confidence of the protagonists in themselves and the ability to control their own fates. One particular strength of both heroes is their relationship, and their determination to fight for a better world together:

Working toward collective goals (e.g., a safer community, a cleaner environment, a more peaceful world) increases hope and meaning by allowing us to strive for goals that are much larger than we could accomplish individually or within our individual lifetimes (Gillham and Reivich, 148).

The heroes' stalwart optimism is accentuated throughout the storylines of "Ides of March" and "Fallen Angel". As *XWP* is a television drama series, optimism is often attained and asserted through struggles. However, the notion of fighting for a "good cause" or, as it is often referred to in the show, "the greater good," has a long tradition in American history and culture. The necessity to work hard and/or to fight for one's goals stands in close relation to cultural concepts such as individualism, Puritan work ethic, and a Frontier Spirit. This particular adaptation of the myth of death and rebirth in *XWP* additionally illuminates how strongly Christian principles have become part of American culture. However, in apparent contrast to the affirmation of Christian beliefs, *XWP* takes spiritual ideas from other religions and mythologies and integrates them into the series' narratives with striking ease. Both attitudes mirror conflicting movements in contemporary U.S. society. On the one hand, Christian religion continues to be of crucial importance in public life, but on the other, civil religion (cf. Mauk and Oakland 317 ff.) demonstrates a growing secularism in American culture. Nevertheless, neither Christianity nor secularism is depicted as an only option. Both are shown to stand side-by-side, emphasizing the idea of "religious freedom" as established in the U.S. constitution.

## **6.2 “I may be dead, but I’m still pretty” – Overpowering Death in Buffy the Vampire Slayer**

In *BtVS* the topic of death is part of the majority of narratives. As a matter of fact, one could say that death is one of the premises of the show. Considering that the vampires, so crucial to the motivation of the series, are technically dead people who returned to the world of the living as undead creatures, death is almost omnipresent in *BtVS*. Since death and dying are such essential parts of the series it is not astonishing that the treatment of this theme is exceptionally varied. Death can come as salvation, e.g., when Buffy slays an evil vampire or demon. Death can be a tragic accident, e.g. when a “good” and popular character dies, such as the human witch Tara (cf. “Seeing Red” 6.19). Death can be supernatural, e.g., when Buffy runs through her vampire boyfriend Angel with a sword and thus condemns him to an afterlife of tortured existence in a hell dimension. Death can be mundane and ultimate, e.g., when Buffy’s mother dies from a brain aneurysm (“The Body” 5.16), or death can be mystical, dynamic, and eventually overcome, e.g., when Buffy dies twice in the course of the show (cf. “Prophecy Girl” 1.12, “The Gift” 5.22). The creators of the series apply certain distinctions between a mundane death and a supernatural death. Whereas a supernatural death is often followed by a “rebirth,” and thus has optimistic elements, the mundane death is depicted as disturbingly realistic (cf. Fletcher 3, or Wilcox, *Body* 175) and leaves the superhero as helpless as anyone from the audience in a similar situation. In the following chapter I would like to examine the three most prevalent types of death in *BtVS*: the “justified” death of a vampire, the two “supernatural” deaths, including their resolutions, and the “mundane,” or realistic death of Buffy’s mother. Each situation will be studied as exemplary concerning the different functions of death in *BtVS*.

### **The “Justified” Death**

The number of vampires slain throughout the series is immense. Typically, vampires being disposed of by Buffy remain nameless and function mostly as action elements. Sometimes, however, a vampire who needs to be slain does indeed have a face and a name and eliminating him or her, demands a conscious and moral choice. To exemplify this type of vampire I would like to take a closer look at the second episode of the first season of *BtVS* “The Harvest” (1.02). Here, Jesse, fellow student of Buffy and good friend of

Xander, is first turned into a vampire and later on killed.<sup>180</sup> The first thing that happens in the transition from human to vampire, according to Buffyverse mythology, is that the person, who is turned, loses his or her soul. With the loss of the soul, the vampire automatically loses his/her humanity, conscience, moral values, and is identified as evil. Inversely, this would indicate a firm belief in the initial goodness of any person who does have a soul, as well as the soul as a signifier for humanity. Greene and Yuen have pointed out that there are “plenty of persons with souls do desire to harm others,” (271) human or otherwise, in the Buffyverse. Nevertheless, I would argue, that the idea of the soul as a prerequisite for humanity and goodness is hinted at repeatedly in *BtVS*. The vampire Angel, for example, becomes capable of human emotions such as remorse and love, only when his soul is restored by a gypsy curse. Similarly, the vampire Spike, though rendered “harmless” through a chip in his head preventing him from biting humans, believes that he can only achieve true humanity and ultimately Buffy’s love, by regaining a soul (cf. “Grave” 6.22). Whereas the term “soul” may be derived from Christian mythology, *BtVS* uses the idea in a decidedly secular manner. Nevertheless, the value invested in the spiritual concept of the soul propagated by *BtVS* is remarkable and points towards deep roots of spirituality in American culture.

Traditionally, the myth of death and rebirth signifies a new beginning or an optimistic renewal of life (cf. Frazer, ch. XXIV, cf. Campbell, *Hero* 50 ff., 150ff). The figure of the vampire, however, is anathema to this positive connotation. The “rebirth” of a human in vampire form not only costs the life and the soul of that person, but also signifies a clear threat to the community. Then, what is needed is a hero figure to step in, alleviate this peril, and return peace and order to society (cf. Campbell, *Hero* 352 ff.) Applied to our scenario it means that Buffy has to stand up and eliminate Jesse to make Sunnydale a safer place. Once turned, Jesse proves his non-humanity in a conversation with his former best buddy Xander:

Xander:        Jesse, man. We’re buds, don’t you remember?  
Jesse:         You’re like a shadow to me now.  
Xander:        Then get outta my face. (“The Harvest” 1.02)

After this exchange it has become clear to Buffy and her friends that Jesse is no longer a friend, or even human being, but needs to be viewed as the enemy. During the showdown in the episode it is aptly Xander, who is set against his former school mate. Armed with a

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<sup>180</sup> One could question whether the elimination of a vampire is indeed a “killing,” as the person in question is technically already dead.

wooden stake, Xander is reluctant to use his weapon, hoping that there is still “a part of [the old Jesse] in there.” Even when Jesse stops fighting and calls out Xander, challenging him to use the stake, Xander cannot do it. It takes a fleeing by-stander, accidentally pushing Xander, and the stake he holds protectively in front of his chest, into Jesse, to eliminate the threat that used to be Xander’s friend. Though slightly shocked by the overall situation, the protagonists do not dwell on the death of Jesse, who was once their fellow student and friend. As a matter of fact, Jesse is not mentioned again, as if eliminating him was only part of the job. Even if Jesse, as a soulless vampire, was evil and per the rationale of the show, had to be taken down, it seems strange that there is so little thought about the human being that came before the vampire. The Scoobies do not take the time to mourn the loss of a friend but move on with an astonishing ease. Such a behavior can only be explained by interpreting Jesse’s death as justified salvation. Not only was he dangerous to humankind, but he also lacked the one thing that made him a morally acceptable being: his soul.

### The “Supernatural” Death

As mentioned above, the main protagonist of *BtVS*, Buffy Summers dies twice during the course of the series. Both times she comes back from death.<sup>181</sup> However, each time the Slayer’s death and resurrection has a different value in the respective storyline. Nevertheless, in each case there are distinctly optimistic connotations discernible in the narrative.

Knowledge of her own death comes to Buffy in the last episode of the first season of *BtVS*, aptly named “Prophecy Girl” (1.12), when overhearing her mentor Rupert Giles, and her friend Angel talk about a prophecy, according to which the Slayer will be killed by a dangerous uber-vampire, called the Master, if she fights him. Thus confronted with news of her impending death, Buffy’s first reaction is denial of the prophecy’s inevitability and looking for a way out:

Buffy:	(to Giles) Were you even gonna tell me?
Giles:	I was hoping that I wouldn't have to. That there was... some way around it. I...
Buffy:	I've got a way around it. I quit!
Angel:	It's not that simple.
Buffy:	I'm making it that simple! I quit! I resign, I'm fired, you can find someone else to stop the Master from taking over!

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<sup>181</sup> Some observations concerning the death and rebirth of Buffy Summers have already been discussed above in chapter 3.2.2.

Buffy's behavior subsequent to this disclosure follows a pattern which has been observed in terminally ill patients, trying to come to terms with the fact that they are about to die. As far back as the 1960s, Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross determined a "grief-cycle" which her patients went through when they learned of their inescapable death (cf. Kübler-Ross). This "cycle", consisting of five different stages, was affirmed in various studies with cancer patients Dr. Kübler-Ross oversaw in American hospitals<sup>182</sup>:

The basic findings of Dr. Ross and her seminar are that the very ill proceed through five emotional stages along the way to death. The first of these is *denial*, and at this point, which often occurs following the person's initial awareness of his sickness, the patient is unwilling or even unable to accept the real nature of his predicament. The stage following this – when physical indications such as loss of weight or increasing pain make further denial impossible – is *anger*. Here the patient, enraged at his illness, may become angry with his family or his doctor, berate the nurses, insist on continuous attention and never find it satisfactory, and generally behave in ways that may provoke in return the anger of his targets. Following this is often a stage of "*bargaining*." Here the patient attempts to stave off the inevitable by striking a bargain for an extension of life or a short period without pain. Many promises made "to live a life dedicated to God" or the church, or offers to give the body or parts of it to science, are made with the silent additional clause that the Lord or the doctors must live up to their part of the bargain. Yet the bargaining does little but provide a temporary respite in the progress of dying. The next and most difficult stage for the patient is a period of increasing *depression* in which he realizes what is happening to him, that denial, anger, bargaining are of no real use any longer. At this point of depression the dying quite literally grieve for themselves, for the fact that they are going to be separated from all they have known and loved. Only after this period of grief does the patient usually arrive at the final stage before death, the stage of *acceptance*. Then, even though the smallest glimmer of hope will remain, he is ready to let go (Wainwright 40, emphasis mine, cf. Kübler-Ross).

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<sup>182</sup> More recent studies on the applicability of the grief cycle system have worked with different terminology, such as numbness-disbelief, separation distress (yearning-anger-anxiety), depression mourning, and recovery (cf. Jacobs), the results however were astonishingly in accord with Kübler-Ross's theories: "Although the temporal course of the absolute levels of the 5 grief indicators did not follow that proposed by the stage theory of grief, when rescaled and examined for each indicator's peak, the data fit the hypothesized sequence exactly" (Maciejewski/Zhang/Block/Prigerson 721).

Buffy's initial denial turns into anger, which she vents on Giles and Angel. After being told that there might not be anyone else to stand up to the Master, Buffy throws a book at Giles and shouts at both of her friends:

Buffy:           The signs? (*throws a book and shouts*) Read me the Signs! (*throws another book and continues shouting*) Tell me my fortune! You're so useful sitting here with all your books! You're really a lotta help!

Instead of trying to bargain, Buffy slips into a phase of depression and mourning for her life cut short. She makes one more attempt to escape her destiny, asking her mother to go away with her for the week-end, only to be told that her mother has to work and Buffy herself is expected to go to the school's dance event. For this event Joyce has even bought a new dress for Buffy and she reminisces about her own experiences at a high school ball where she met Buffy's father:

Joyce:           Oh, but it was a beautiful night!  
Buffy:           And you had your whole life ahead of you.  
Joyce:           Yeah.  
Buffy:           Must be nice.

Buffy is in mourning for herself. For the life she believes she will never have and the woman she will never be. However, the time to grieve is short as the episode needs to move along. When Buffy's best friend Willow is confronted with several of her class mates having been butchered by a group of vampires on school grounds, Buffy re-assumes the mantle of the superhero:

Willow:          I knew those guys. I go to that room every day. And when I walked in there, it... it wasn't our world anymore. They made it theirs. And they had fun. (*a tear rolls down her cheek*) What are we gonna do?  
Buffy:           (*determined*) What we have to.

At this point Buffy accepts her fate. She accepts that she needs to reclaim her status as the Slayer, and the responsibility that comes with it even if she never asked for her special powers. The decision to confront the Master means the acceptance of her own death. However, Buffy's choice is not simply a pragmatic resignation of facts, but leaves room for hope and even optimism. When Buffy arms herself with a crossbow to fight the Master, Ms. Calendar, a teacher who knows about Buffy being the Slayer, warns her "you fight the Master, and you'll die," Buffy simply replies "maybe I'll take him with me." The Slayer is optimistic that her abilities will help her to make a change and her death may possibly save the world. In that she can be called an optimist:

Optimists ... are more likely to persist in their pursuit of goals when confronted with difficult life situations. Optimists take advantage of the opportunities for development to a greater extent than pessimists do. Optimists might also cope more effectively when goals are blocked (Wrosch and Scheier 64).

Eventually, when Buffy confronts the Master, she does indeed lose the fight and subsequently her life. The Master drinks Buffy's blood, which has a strengthening effect on him, and thus he is able to break out of his magical prison. Meanwhile Buffy drowns in a puddle of water. The prophecy has been fulfilled. However, simply because a prophecy has turned into reality and the hero is dead, does not mean that this is the end of the story. In a universe of superheroes, death can be followed by rebirth, or in this case, resuscitation.

Buffy might be dead, but there is still time for her friends Angel and Xander, who have followed her to the Master's lair, to take control of the situation and work for a positive outcome (cf. Gillham/Reivich 147) :

Angel:        She's dead!  
Xander:       No. She's not dead.  
Angel:        She's not breathing.  
Xander:       But if she drowned, uh, there's a shot! CPR!

Buffy's death and resuscitation in this situation can be interpreted as an apotheosis which changes the archetypal hero profoundly. Campbell has described apotheosis as "the divine state to which the human hero attains who has gone beyond the last terrors of ignorance" (*Hero* 151). In this divine state death becomes simply another form of existence, of being. The hero gains new knowledge of life and a new birth of the hero is possible (cf. *ibid.* 162). For Buffy, being brought back from the dead fills her with new, possibly even additional, strength to continue her tasks as the Slayer. About five minutes after the successful CPR, Buffy sets off to fight the Master once more. She is confident in herself and her powers:

Xander:       You're still weak.  
Buffy:        (*stops*) No. No, I feel strong. I feel different. Let's go!

Even though Xander and Angel offer to help Buffy, the Slayer insists on facing the Master on her own. In classical film fashion it comes to a stand-off between the hero and the villain. Not so classical, perhaps, is the language during this encounter. References to school and teenage life support identification of the target group, young adults, with the hero. The verbal sparring which Buffy delivers establishes her as an image of the ideal



1990s American teenage superhero: witty with a good fashion sense and thoroughly self-confident:

Master: You're dead!  
 Buffy: I may be dead, but I'm still pretty. Which is more than I can say for you.  
 Master: You were destined to die! It was written!  
 Buffy: What can I say? I flunked the written.

The Slayer is a superhero with whom teenage audiences are likely to identify. Even though she has supernatural powers, she is still only a teenager, having to go to school, and not doing too well either. On the other hand, looking good and being cool are two desires that young people, watching the show, can easily comprehend.

In the subsequent fight Buffy manages to overcome the Master and reduces him to dust. Only his bare bones remain. Buffy and her friends meet and discuss what has happened. The fact that Buffy died seems to be merely one exciting event among others on this particular day. The group restores their confidence in their own power through amusing dialogue and return to the normality of life in a matter of minutes:

Giles: The vampires?  
 Cordelia: Gone.  
 Angel: The Master?  
 Giles: Dead. The Hellmouth is closed. Buffy... Buffy?  
 Buffy: Oh, sorry. It's just been a really weird day. *(smiles)*  
 Xander: Yeah! Buffy died, and everything!  
 Willow: Wow! Harsh.  
 Giles: I should have known that wouldn't stop you.  
*(Buffy smiles up at him)*  
 Ms. Calendar: Well, what do we do now?  
 Giles: I don't know about the rest of you, but I'd like to get out of this place. I don't like the library very much anymore.  
 Xander: Hey! I hear there's a dance at the Bronze tonight. Could be fun.  
 Cordelia: Yeah!  
 Willow: Buffy?  
 Buffy: Sure! We saved the world. I say we party! *(looks down at her dress)*  
 I mean, I got all pretty.  
 Ms. Calendar: And what about him? *(points at the Master)*  
 Buffy: *(looks at the Master)* He's not going anywhere. Loser.

The Master has lost and the Slayer has confirmed her status as a superhero. Self-confidence and optimism have led to power, victory, and the restoration of life.

About four years later in the narrative and the production of *BtVS*, Buffy dies again (cf. "The Gift" 5.22). Once again, it has been a conscious choice of the Slayer to sacrifice her life in order to save that of her sister Dawn, and to prevent an apocalypse threatening to

destroy the whole world.<sup>183</sup> She is literally brought back from the grave by a magical spell which her friends, under the guidance of Willow, perform (cf. “Bargaining, Pt.1” 6.01). Wrosch and Scheier have asserted that: “One important mechanism is that optimists use different strategies to manage critical life situations than pessimists do. People who are confident about their future exert continuing effort, even when dealing with serious adversity” (65). By not accepting death as the end of everything, Buffy’s friends thus display aggressive optimism in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

This time, however, resurrection does not seem to herald a newly found strength, a change for the better, or a renewal. After Buffy has had to claw her way out of the grave, she is confused, frightened and seems to have forgotten how to fight. It takes her a few days (and two episodes) to realize who, and where she is. Nevertheless, there is no joy in this discovery. Instead, she confesses to the vampire Spike:

- Buffy:           Wherever I ... was ... I was happy. At peace.  
                       *(Spike stares, shocked.)*
- Buffy:           I knew that everyone I cared about was all right. I knew it. Time ...  
                       didn’t mean anything ... nothing had form ... but I was still me, you  
                       know? *(glances at Spike, then away)* And I was warm ... and I was  
                       loved ... and I was finished. Complete. I don’t understand about  
                       theology or dimensions, or ... any of it, really ... but I think I was in  
                       heaven.  
                       *(Spike continues to stare at her in dismay.)*
- Buffy:           And now I’m not. I was torn out of there. Pulled out ... by my friends.  
                       Everything here is ... hard, and bright, and violent. Everything I feel,  
                       everything I touch ... this is hell. Just getting through the next  
                       moment, and the one after that ... *(softly)* knowing what I’ve lost...  
                       (“After Life” 6.03)

Buffy’s friends only learn this tragic truth later, in the musical episode “Once More With Feeling” (6.07), in which Buffy sings about the traumatic experience of having been taken from a place where she was happy and content: “There was no pain/ No fear, no doubt/ Till they pulled me out/Of Heaven/ So that’s my refrain./ I live in Hell/ ‘Cause I’ve been expelled/ From Heaven/ I think I was in Heaven” (“Once More With Feeling” 6.07). Though Buffy speaks and sings about heaven and hell, these terms are not explicitly linked to Christian mythology. Instead they are rather used to emphasize particular emotions than religious or even supernatural dimensions.

Tearing her away from this peaceful place, and throwing her back into a life full of demons, battles and pain, has been a traumatic experience with which Buffy struggles

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<sup>183</sup> A more detailed description of this narrative has been included above in chapter 3.2.2.

continually throughout the sixth season of *BtVS*. This storyline can hardly be called overly optimistic, but it becomes more hopeful the further the season progresses. Optimism and hope often have an almost symbiotic relationship and are frequently used synonymously:

Hope is often defined as a wish for something with some expectation that it will happen, while optimism is typically defined as a tendency or disposition to expect the best ... In the psychological literature, however, this distinction is usually blurred (Gillham/Reivich 147).

Thus, if we accept the terms “hope” and “optimism” to be closely related, the optimistic tendencies of *BtVS* as a series can once more be affirmed.

Following the narrative, one of the first glimpses of hope can be seen in the episode “Gone” (6.11), when Buffy comes close to dying. For the first time since returning to Sunnydale she expresses a wish to continue her life:

Buffy:	When I got Xander’s message ... that I was fading away, I actually got scared.
Willow:	Well, yeah. Who wouldn’t?
Buffy:	Me. I wouldn’t. Not too long ago I probably would have welcomed it. But I realized ... I’m not saying that I’m doing back-flips about my life, but ( <i>nods</i> ) I didn’t..., I don’t ... wanna die. ( <i>looks hopefully at Willow</i> ) That’s something, right?
Willow:	It’s something.

Eventually, hope prevails as Buffy learns to enjoy life and to care for her family and friends once more. She also becomes more effective as the Slayer, when the idea of protecting humans and their whole world gains essential meaning to Buffy again. Consequently, optimism, or hope can be seen as a crucial element of a successful and happy life:

Hope is both the earliest and the most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive. If life is to be sustained hope must remain (Erik H. Erikson, qt. in: Gillham/Reivich 146).

Resolving the storyline around death and rebirth of the Slayer in season six, is the final episode “Grave” (6.22). The imminent destruction of the world at the hands of Willow having turned into a rogue, extremely powerful witch, calls the Slayer and her friends to yet another epic battle. The setting for the final combat is a cemetery, where Xander, Willow’s best friend ever since kindergarden, tries to convince Willow to stop exterminating planet earth and all life on it. The sky is dark and the air is filled with a magical thunderstorm, created by Willow. Buffy and Dawn have fallen into a hole in the

ground. Quite literally, they have entered a tomb, or a mythical underworld, as coffins are sticking out of the walls surrounding them. The enemies which present themselves to the Slayer and her sister are also very elemental, as Willow creates monsters made up of earth and rocks to fight the sisters.

Above, Xander is eventually able to break through Willow's rage and tap into the love the two friends hold for each other. Willow ceases her magical efforts to bring the world to an end and collapses crying into Xander's arms. In that very instant the creatures Buffy and Dawn were fighting simply crumble and become harmless earth and dust once more. Relieved, Buffy begins to cry. This leads Dawn to presume her sister's tears express unhappiness about still being alive. However, the opposite is true:

Buffy:            Things have really sucked lately, but it's all gonna change. And I wanna be there when it does. (*cries*) I want to see my friends happy again. And I want to see you grow up. The woman you're gonna become. Because she's gonna be beautiful. And she's going to be powerful. I got it so wrong. I don't want to protect you from the world. I want to show it to you. There's so much that I want to show you. ("Grave" 6.22)

The overall hopeful mood continues, as subsequently Buffy's friends are shown, supporting each other once the catastrophe has successfully been circumvented. Both images and music emphasize a renewal of life, a new beginning where things will be better. Sarah McLachlan's song *The Prayer of St. Francis* puts this hope into words. Willow and Xander embrace on the lyrics "Where there is despair, hope/ Where there is darkness, light/ Where there is sadness, joy". Buffy and Dawn clamber out of the pit. They have fought their way through the underworld and now emerge to the light of the living. Looking around Buffy smiles and her sister comes up to stand beside her. Both walk along the lush green of the graveyard, their arms are around each other, towards the rising sun. The verses that accompany them are: "And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned/ And it's in dying that we are born-/ To eternal life".

Thus the second narrative of the Slayer coming back from a supernatural death concludes on a very optimistic note. The world has been saved, the friends have survived, Buffy and Dawn have strengthened their relationship as sisters, and the audience is left with the hope for another exciting season to come.

### The “Mundane” Death

In stark difference to the “justified” and the “supernatural” deaths discussed above, are instances of “mundane” deaths in *BtVS*. These narratives temporarily remove the characters from their supernatural universe in which everything seems possible, and return them to a plane of ordinariness in which there is no place for optimism and superheroes become terrifyingly powerless.

One such storyline occurs in the fifth season of *BtVS*. The narrative deals with Buffy’s and Dawn’s mother Joyce Summers being diagnosed with a brain tumor. At first, Buffy is convinced that her mother’s illness must be the result of an attack by a supernatural enemy directed at herself as the Slayer. A supernatural explanation for her concerns would in fact be a relief to Buffy, as she is experienced in how to defeat such threats:

Buffy:	We need to find out who’s making my mom sick and how.
Willow:	Then what?
Buffy:	Then I hunt them... find them... and kill them. (“There’s No Place Like Home” 6.05)

This reaction is very much in tune with Buffy’s usual optimistic attitude to life. She is confident when dealing with a paranormal menace and is ready to take control of the events in her life (cf. Gillham and Reivich 147). Unfortunately, however, in the episode “There’s No Place Like Home” (6.05) Buffy reluctantly needs to accept that there is nothing mystical involved in Joyce’s illness. The threat is a very mundane, albeit very dangerous, brain tumor. After surgery on the tumor, Joyce seems to be well on her way to recovery when she suddenly dies of a brain aneurysm. Her lifeless body, lying on the living-room couch is discovered by Buffy at the end of the episode “I Was Made to Love You” (5.15). This last scene of episode fifteen serves as a bridge to the following episode “The Body” (5.16), where it functions as the opening scene. Joyce’s body not only shocks Buffy, but audiences as well, through its confrontational realistic depiction of death: “Joyce is not a traditional Hollywood corpse. Her eyes are not closed as if in sleep; her limbs are not charmingly disposed. She is open-eyed, stiff, and pale” (Wilcox, 179). These open-eyes, which remain open throughout the entire episode, serve as a constant reminder to the audience of the immediacy and disturbing matter-of-factness of death.

“The Body” focuses on the “extreme physicality, the almost boredom, of the very first few hours” (Joss Whedon, DVD commentary “The Body”) after the death of a loved one. Writer and director of the episode Joss Whedon, creates a hauntingly realistic atmosphere. This is not simply achieved through images and dialogue, but very much through the deliberate absence of music and the careful placing of everyday sounds, such as cars

driving by, wind chimes on a window, the singing of birds or the distant sound of the ocean (cf. Wilcox 180). Lawson Fletcher, examining the combination of different genres within *BtVS*, likens the use of sound in this episode to the genre of horror movies:

Perhaps the most significant way ‘The Body’ initiates the affective dimension of genre is how it decodes the horrific into the realistic. The paradox of sound in the episode demonstrates this, as the absence of non-diegetic sound actually draws attention toward the *irreality*, indeed the horror, of seemingly natural sounds, offering a new ‘white noise’ that acts as a flat line for ‘natural’ sounds to announce themselves with varying degrees of affect. (9, emphasis Fletcher)

Finding her mother’s lifeless body throws the mind of the powerful Slayer back to being a helpless, small child, full of fear, evident in Buffy’s shocked response to seeing her mother dead on the couch: “Mom? Mom?” (*and then, very quietly*) “Mommy?” (cf. Wilcox 178). Though having seen and dealt out death often enough as the Slayer, Buffy is overwhelmed by this intrusion of death into the erstwhile physically and emotionally safe place of home. Using the unsteady images of a handheld camera to observe Buffy’s reactions conveys the girl’s panic and confusion to the audience. Normally cool-headed and efficient, Buffy needs to be told by the emergency operator what to do, i.e., to administer CPR to her mother. The scene in which Buffy administers CPR once again relates the “almost obscene physicality” (Whedon *ibid.*) of the situation, when Buffy accidentally breaks one of her mother’s ribs and being told by the operator “You might have cracked a rib. It’s not important.”

When the paramedics finally arrive, we see them working on Joyce. Suddenly, Joyce is waking up, on her way to the hospital and everyone declares her coming back a “miracle.” However, this miracle, merely a vision of Buffy’s, ends abruptly when the audience is pulled back into the Summer’s living room, where one of the paramedics professionally, but somewhat callously, announces Joyce to be “cold.” The fantasy of a happy ending is an almost natural reaction, induced by the problem of accepting the finality of death. Whedon explains that he included this excursion (similar “what-if” scenarios occur twice during the episode) “because I don’t know anybody who has suffered the panic of a great loss without having imagined it going a different way, a thousand times or more” (Whedon, *ibid.*)

Buffy’s inability to deal with the situation is mirrored by her friends. The “Scoobie Gang” is usually up to things and capable of helping out. Confronted with the death of Joyce, however, they do not know how to behave, as Anya so plainly phrases: “Xander, what will *we* do? What will *we* be expected to do?” (emphasis Anya). To visually

emphasize the helplessness of the friends, Whedon uses a camera angle from above, showing Xander, Anya, Willow, and Tara, standing in a loose circle, arms crossed, small and frightened by the realities of life. In this situation the characters do not only “act as a means of identification, leading audiences through plot lines, but in ‘The Body’ this relationship extends to the characters *embodying* the viewer’s own experience” (Fletcher 7, emphasis Fletcher).

The paralyzing reality of the situation is further carefully constructed in images, when Buffy goes to Dawn’s school to impart the news of their mother’s death. This sequence opens with Dawn crying in the school’s bathroom about whether or not a boy in class likes her. Shortly after that, in art class, Dawn flirts with this boy. Dawn is shown fully participating in a tumultuous, but overall happy, teenage life. However, as Wilcox has pointed out, even in this seemingly cheerful situation, the shadow of death can already be seen:

The students are drawing a white marble, Greek-style statue of a female – the colorless stone and classic form a counterpoint for a live body – and the dead body just a bit closer to stone. [...] The teacher has instructed, ‘We’re not drawing the object – we’re drawing the negative space around the object.’ Just so, the episode deals with the reaction around Joyce – or rather, around the body. ‘Negative space – what’s that all about?’ Dawn asks just before Buffy enters; it is, of course, about loss, about absence (185).

When her big sister comes to see her at school, Dawn instinctively knows that something fundamental has happened: “Watch her face when Buffy says her name. She knows. She doesn’t know what she knows, she just knows something. In that moment, she gets older” (Whedon, commentary). Even though Dawn might rationally understand the reality of death, her emotions rebel against this knowledge and she refuses to believe the truth:

Xander:       How’d she [Dawn] take it?  
Buffy:        Meltdown. She just wouldn’t believe me. I still don’t think she does.

Along with the news arises an uncomfortable tension between the sisters. Buffy and Dawn are both trapped inside their own grief and unable to communicate. Buffy even interprets Dawn’s reaction as anger at herself:

Buffy:        I think maybe she’s mad at me or something.  
Willow:       ‘Cause you were the one that told her?

Whedon explains that death, in his experience, “seldom brings people together. It actually tears them apart” (Whedon, *ibid.*) Consequently, Whedon sets up the Summers sisters to drift continually further away from each other in the process of dealing with the death of their mother.

To Dawn, accepting her mother's death becomes a quest of knowing. As long as she has not seen her mother's dead body, she rejects the reality of death. Thus, when Buffy and her friends are at the hospital, waiting for the results of Joyce's autopsy, Dawn sneaks away into the morgue to see her mother. Interestingly, it is in the morgue, where the very physical and "real" atmosphere of the show re-merges with the supernatural universe of Sunnydale, as one of the bodies in the morgue rises from its slab to reveal a hungry vampire attacking Dawn. Buffy, having suspected that her sister might be up to something unsavory, follows her to the morgue and battles the undead creature. Rhonda Wilcox contends that the appearance of the vampire does not break with the general realism of the episode: "because of the verisimilitude of the episode, the vampire's attack in the morgue – its intrusion into the realism – is as violent as death itself. It is death within death" (187). The vampire reminds the audience of Buffy's "job" as the Slayer, and that this work needs to continue even in the face of personal tragedy. The nakedness of the vampire stands in disquieting relation to the nakedness of Joyce's body, covered only by a white sheet, and thus "reasserts the physicality of death" (Wilcox 188).

In the process of the fight, the sheet, covering Joyce's body, is dislodged to reveal Joyce's head, her eyes still open and a hint of autopsy sutures on her chest. Once again the camera plays with the extreme physicality present in this scene, and the shocked, yet still not quite understanding eyes of Dawn in contrast. In order to finally reach acceptance, Dawn reaches out slowly, the camera following the movement of the character's finger, to touch her mother. This imagery is, of course, strongly influenced by Michelangelo's painting "The Creation of Adam," only that the spark of life is utterly absent in this situation.

As a matter of fact, Dawn, and the audience, are not allowed a cathartic physical connection with death. About half an inch away from Joyce's face, the picture suddenly goes black and the end credits start. Taken as a metaphor Whedon explains that this shot was made to show that "we want to touch it [death], but there is nothing there. There is no resolve, there is no resolution. There is no ending, there is no lesson. There's just death" (Whedon, *ibid.*).

The "mundane" death in *BtVS* is thus clearly designed to mark a difference between the supernatural universe in which *BtVS* is situated and the world of the audience, where death is irrevocable and an eternal loss.

Even though there are no obvious optimistic elements in this particular episode concerning Joyce Summer's death, I would argue that the storyline does not remain as



bleak as Whedon's comment suggests. His colleague Marti Noxon, who wrote the episode "Forever" (5.17), succeeding "The Body," sketches such a lesson from death, a resolution for the Buffy and Dawn. While Joss Whedon refutes his own perception that he "had always learned from TV that death made everybody stronger and better, and learn about themselves," (Whedon, *ibid.*) Noxon clarifies how death can be followed by a learning experience in "Forever."

"Forever" has Dawn searching for some magic spell to bring her mother back from the dead. Surprisingly she finds help from an unlikely source: the vampire Spike, who has a good idea what the girl is up to, but decides to help Dawn nonetheless. Later in the narrative, a mysterious man, who is known to the supernatural denizens of Sunnydale as "Doc," gives the girl a spell which will bring her mother back to the realm of the living. Results may vary, however, as Doc explains to Dawn:

Doc: It's a tricky spell, girl. I can't say for sure your mother will come back exactly like she was. (*shots of Dawn and Spike listening*) Sometimes these ... things ... get a little off.  
Dawn: But she'll still be my mother. Won't she?  
Doc: More or less.

Meanwhile, Dawn's relationship to her sister has cooled off so much that she does not even stay with Buffy after the funeral of their mother, but sleeps over at Willow and Tara's place. Both sisters begin the episode very much alone and unable to talk to each other. Buffy's biggest problem is her own feeling of inadequacy, which she does not want to admit, always having been the strong one, the older sister, the Slayer. But when her former boyfriend Angel comes to see her after Joyce's funeral, Buffy expresses her fears very clearly:

Buffy: The funeral was ... (*sighs*) it was brutal, but it's tomorrow that I'm worried about.  
Angel: What's tomorrow?  
Buffy: That's exactly what I don't know. Up until now, I ... I've had a road map. Things to do every minute, having to do with Mom.  
Angel: Tomorrow the stuff of everyday living resumes.  
Buffy: And everybody expects me to know how to do it, because ... (*sarcastically*) I'm so strong.  
Angel: You just need some time. I'm sure everybody understands that.  
Buffy: Time's not the issue. I can stick wood in vampires ... but Mom was the strong one in real life. She always knew how to make things better ... just what to say.

Alarmed by her friends Willow and Tara, Buffy finds Dawn the next evening in her room, having just finished the spell to bring their mother back. Disturbing images of two pale feet

in blue pumps walking on grass are intercut with an argument between Buffy and Dawn. In the course of this argument the sisters fall into a shouting match, where later, Buffy finally admits her personal fears:

Dawn: You've been avoiding me.  
Buffy: I'm not! ... I have to do these things, 'cause ... (*crying*) 'cause when I stop, then she's really gone.  
(*Dawn frowns in confusion*)  
Buffy: And I'm trying. Dawn, I am, I am really trying to take care of things, but I don't even know what I'm doing. Mom always knew.  
Dawn: Nobody's asking you to be Mom.  
Buffy: Well, who's gonna be if I'm not? Huh, Dawn? Have you even thought about that? Who's gonna make things better? (*crying harder*) Who's gonna take care of us?  
Dawn: Buffy...  
Buffy: I didn't mean to push you away, I didn't. I just, I couldn't let you see me.  
(*Dawn begins to cry*)  
Buffy: (*still crying*) I don't know what we're gonna do. I'm scared.  
Dawn: Buffy...

Once the truth has been revealed, Buffy gives in to her weakness. When there is a knock at the door, Buffy is the first to give a hopeful smile and says "Mommy?" As Buffy races to the door in the hope to find her mother and return to her old life, Dawn is the one to take charge. Before Buffy can open the door, Dawn tears the photograph of her mother, which she had used for the resurrection spell, thus ending the spell and returning whatever creature was standing in front of the door back to where it came from. Buffy is disappointed and devastated. She is, however, finally open to receive help and accepts comfort from Dawn.

Buffy: (*voice breaking*) Dawn.  
(*She begins to sob. Dawn comes forward and hugs her*)  
Dawn: It's okay.  
(*They sink to the floor, holding each other tightly and crying*)  
Dawn: It's okay.

This very dramatic ending to the storyline around Joyce's death has very hopeful and even optimistic undertones. Death can, in fact, strengthen the connection between people, but only if they are honest and open about their emotions. We find the sisters reunited by sharing their grief, their fears, but also their strengths. The magical component serves as a catalyst for the development of the narrative. Attempting to bring Joyce back by magic is the element which forces the characters to interact and which eventually leads to the solution of a situation which the audience can relate to.

**Functions of Death in *BtVS***

The three different types of death, “justified,” “supernatural,” and “mundane,” each have their own place in *BtVS*. Eliminating vampires is a justified action and can be seen as a routine event which does not warrant further consideration from the characters. Vampires who are posed as a natural enemy of humans need to be staked. This is the Slayer’s job and nothing more. The only optimistic notion about this everyday task might be that the world is safer with every vampire turned to dust. When the Slayer herself is killed, either by a supernatural enemy or an apocalyptic incident, death functions as a herald for change and a new beginning. Even though the narrative may seem bleak and discouraging there is always hope and most often strong or even aggressively optimistic tendencies are displayed by the characters. The universe of superheroes is reduced somewhat to a more “real” environment, when a case of the “mundane” death occurs in the series. The characters suddenly appear very ordinary in their reactions and behavior when death shakes the foundations of their world. And yet, even if Whedon claims that “there is no resolve, there is no resolution ... there is no lesson,” I would argue that this is not true. Instead, the lesson lies in working through the trauma of death together with friends and family. Eventually, the sky will be bright again and that “the future will have something better in store” (Croly 3) for the characters and the audience.

### 6.3 *The Time is Right – Changing the Past and the Future in Witchblade*

Compared to *XWP* or *BtVS*, *WB* has a very different approach to life and death. Death is merely another form of existence. Thanks to the Witchblade artifact, Sara Pezzini is able to communicate with the dead.<sup>184</sup> Indeed, Sara acknowledges the ability to communicate with her dead partner Danny Woo to be a crucial personal advantage: “Of all the gifts the Witchblade has given me, the biggest one just may be you” (“Convergence” 1.10). In almost every episode of the show, we see the Witchblade give Sara helpful insights into what has happened at a crime scene or something about a person’s past or future in visions. It does not matter whether those people are alive or dead. The realms of life and death in *Witchblade* are very closely connected. They are connected through time. As a matter of fact, whether a person is dead or alive in the *Witchblade* universe is not so much a question of religion, belief systems or metaphysics, but only of different temporal spaces. When Sara encounters her grandmother Elizabeth Bronte during her *Periculum*, a trial imposed on every wielder of the Witchblade to prove their worthiness (cf. ch. 4.1.3, cf. “Periculum” 1.07), Elizabeth explains the problematic issues of perception of life and death, and time and space:

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| Elizabeth: | We are related, but not in the way that you think. We’re the same person.  |
| Sara:      | You mean, I’m you reincarnated?  |
| Elizabeth: | Hmm. The idea of reincarnation comes from a natural sense that there is more to this world than we can taste or touch. Unfortunately, it misses the main point.  |
| Sara:      | Which is ... ?   |
| Elizabeth: | Time. You think of time as if it were a straight line, like a road or a train track, with the past at one end and the future at the other. The metaphor is seductive, but it’s highly misleading. The world was flat till we discovered it was round. You must break your old paradigm of time, Sara. Both past and future are contained in the eternal present. |
| Sara:      | Yeah, yeah. I saw <i>The Terminator</i> . It made my head hurt.  |
| Elizabeth: | Better example than you realize. Think of a reel of motion picture film. Each frame is a lifetime, but all of them exist at once. If you run it through the projector of human consciousness ...   |
| Sara:      | You create continuity.   |

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<sup>184</sup> Her partner Danny Woo appears to her frequently after having been shot in the pilot episode of the series. He takes on the function of a guiding spirit for Sara. Later on, in the episode “Legion” (1.05), Sara insists on speaking with a homicide victim, through the Witchblade, in order to find out more about the suspected killer.

- Elizabeth: No, my dear, the illusion of continuity. But if you think of the reel wound just so, some of the frames touch other frames. From one frame through another, any frame can be reached, but all of them exist at once.  
[...]
- Sara: So, time is just a matter of perception?
- Elizabeth: I am not from your past, Sara, nor you from my future. Both of our lifetimes exist right now.
- Sara: So, I'm not your reincarnation ... I'm you.
- Elizabeth: As I am you. And we are each of the other wielders. Remember this and use it.

This dialogue reveals a rather unique interpretation of life and death in an American television show. Life and death are not arranged in a cyclical pattern. Where Frazer (cf. e.g. ch. XLIV, "Demeter and Persephone"), Campbell (cf. *Hero* 151 ff.) and Frye (cf. *Anatomy* 158 ff.) see the order of life, death, and rebirth as an opportunity for change, progress and renewal, this idea is challenged in the *WB* universe. Here, life and death exist at the same time, simply in a slightly different space. In consequence, this idea should exclude all common notions of religion, of heaven or hell, or an afterlife in general. Yet, the contrary is true. The existence of demons (cf. "Legion" 1.05) or helpful spirits is accepted as fact. Indeed, mythological imagery is vital to the creation of the series' atmosphere. The use of these images and legends demonstrates once again, that it is not so much the secularization of religious imagery,<sup>185</sup> which captivates the audience, but the endless opportunities to adapt and fill the unexplained spaces of myth and legend with contemporary concerns.

Considering the focus on supernatural events in the *Witchblade* universe, Sara Pezzini approaches life in an astonishingly no-nonsense and self-determined way. She firmly believes that "God helps them that help themselves," an idiom, usually attributed to that archetypal American, Benjamin Franklin (cf. Franklin 23). This attitude speaks of a dogged optimism displayed by Sara. If we concur that optimistic people tend to believe that they control their own destiny (cf. Uslander 448) and that the future will be better than the current situation (cf. Croly 3), Sara Pezzini is a prime example for an American optimist.

As already mentioned, designs of life and death in *WB* are most often discussed in context with time. A prime example for a narrative with patterns of death and rebirth, as well as determined optimism, is the episode "Transcendence" (1.11). Here, we can find

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<sup>185</sup> The show combines images from Celtic religion (cf. "Periculum" 1.07), Christian symbols (cf. "Legion" 1.05), as well as elements from ancient Egypt or Japan (cf. Pilot Episode) without discrimination.

several storylines concerning death, rebirth, immortality, and the capricious nature of time. In particular, I would like to examine three storylines in which characters attempt to overcome death, at times, successfully so. The first storyline concerns the mysterious multi-billionaire Kenneth Irons, the second, his henchman Ian Nottingham, and the third concentrates on the main protagonist, Sara Pezzini.

### **Setting and Story**

“Transcendence” (1.11), the final episode of its first season, finds the hero of *WB*, Sara Pezzini, suspended from her job as detective and hunted by the White Bulls, a secret society of corrupt policemen within the New York City police force. Sara knows that her former superior officer, Captain Bruno Dante, is part of this organization and most likely the person who murdered her father. Sara’s rookie partner Jake McCartey has turned out to be an undercover FBI agent investigating the White Bulls. Before the opening credits of the episode roll, the audience is brought up to speed by a voice-over of Sara, explaining what has happened so far:

The past few months have been tough. It all started when I encountered the Witchblade. Exactly what it is and why *I* was chosen to wield it is still a mystery to me. But I do believe that Kenneth Irons, one of New York’s fiercest power brokers, has the answers. Since I encountered the Witchblade, I have lost my partner, my lover, my mentor, and perhaps a bit of my sanity. My life is in danger. I no longer know who to trust. And I’ve had some experiences that can only be called supernatural. Hopefully, things will only get better. And with a little luck, I will learn why my father was killed. And why I was chosen to wield this damn thing called the Witchblade (“Transcendence” 1.11, emphasis Sara).

In this short review of the narrative we discover several important things for this show: up to this point, several people close to the main character have died, the supernatural is an acknowledged part of the universe, and there is always hope for a better future.

### **A Quest for Immortality: Kenneth Irons**

Kenneth Irons represents an ancient and yet very contemporary human desire: eternal youth.<sup>186</sup> From the ancient Greeks to the Spanish conquistadores, stories of a mythical

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<sup>186</sup> This topic was already discussed above in 3.1.3.

Fountain of Youth have been recounted for thousands of years.<sup>187</sup> And even today this legend is being retold in blockbuster films such as the fourth installment of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series: *On Stranger Tides* (2011).

Today, with widespread belief in the powers of science, plastic surgeons offer their services all over the modern United States<sup>188</sup> to prolong their patients' beauty and youth. For many people today, youth is a synonym for being healthy and beautiful. Health and youth also provide a solid foundation for power, which is what Kenneth Irons of the *WB* universe most desires. Irons' secret fountain of youth is the Witchblade ("It is merely the fountain of youth." Irons in "Convergence" 1.10). According to the series' narrative, Irons has tried to wear the Witchblade in the past,<sup>189</sup> only to be rejected by the artifact. However, the billionaire explains that his "contact with the Witchblade" has given him a longer lifespan (cf. "Transcendence" 1.11). Unfortunately, the effects of this encounter did not last very long. Nevertheless, Kenneth Irons has discovered that the blood of an approved wielder is equally able to prolong his life (cf. above ch. 5.3).

Early on in the series, Sara discovers that one of Kenneth Irons' secrets is an unnatural longevity. We see him in photographs from the 1950s and 60s (cf. "Conundrum" 1.02) looking exactly like he does in 2001, where the series is set. Later, the audience learns that Irons' contact with the Witchblade artifact has given him an extended life span. We could say that Irons represents humankind's fear of death and wish for immortality. Literary figures, such as Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein or Bram Stokers' Count Dracula, can be seen as similar representatives of this desire for defeating death and/or possession of eternal youth. Perhaps Count Dracula and the vampire mythology come closest to the character of Kenneth Irons. Though he is clearly no vampire, his longevity is the result of a particular serum, whose primary ingredient is the blood of a wielder of the Witchblade (cf. "Convergence" 1.10). So, like a vampire, Irons ingests blood in order to prolong his life and maintain the appearance of a man in his late thirties or early forties. The blood Irons has been using for the past decades comes from the frozen body of Elizabeth Bronte, Sara's grandmother and the last wielder of the Witchblade before Sara. Keeping her "fresh" in a cryo-chamber since the 1940s (judging from the type of clothes Bronte wears

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<sup>187</sup> cf. Herodotus, Book III: 22-24, cf. Peck.

<sup>188</sup> In Tampa, Florida one can even find a cosmetic surgery center called: The Fountain of Youth (<http://www.fountainofyouth.com/>).

<sup>189</sup> It is not known when this happened exactly. In the comic books, Irons found the Witchblade artifact in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century at an archeological digsite in Greece (cf. Comic Vine, <http://www.comicvine.com/kenneth-irons/29-43915/>).

and the information the audience is given in “Conundrum” 1.02). However, the blood of the last wielder is almost used up and Irons is aging visibly. Irons’ doctor, aptly called Dr Immo, i.e., the person who helps Irons in his quest for immortality, has tried to replace the need for blood by using the latest medical inventions, such as a “hyper-growth hormone from Paris” (“Convergence” 1.10). But, all the science is no substitute for the magic of Sara’s blood. Consequently, Irons sends out his henchman Ian Nottingham to procure the source, dead or alive. Even though Nottingham is killed in the course of the episode, he is “reborn” and returns for a final battle with Sara.

### **The Rebirth of Ian Nottingham**

Both Kenneth Irons and Ian Nottingham present different concepts of the desire to overcome time, and ultimately, death. Whereas Irons’ longevity stems from the magical properties of the Witchblade and a wielder’s blood, the continuous existence of Ian Nottingham is primarily based on science.<sup>190</sup> In “Transcendence” Nottingham is revealed to be a meticulously engineered clone with a close connection to the Witchblade and its wielders. Irons explains to Sara towards the end of the episode: “Some women in your bloodline – yourself, Elizabeth Bronte – are born with certain biological anomalies. In fact, it is from the preserved stem cells of Elizabeth and the work of my well-financed researchers that I was able to create Ian Nottingham and then replace and improve him.”

According to the narrative of the series, Elizabeth Bronte is Sara Pezzini’s grandmother. However, as such she is only another representation of Sara herself: “I am you. And we are each of the other wielders” (“Periculum” 1.07). Consequently, Ian Nottingham could be seen as something of a biological brother, or at least cousin, to Sara, or, as she realizes “flesh and blood” (“Transcendence” 1.11).

Whereas the unsoiled supernatural resource of Irons’ power has been successful for a long time, the more mundane (though admittedly rather science-fictional) enterprise of replicating Nottingham, has always been burdened with faults. The Ian Nottingham whom the audience has become acquainted with throughout the first season is said to have been unsuccessful because he was “defective in his emotional make-up. He was soft” (“Transcendence” 1.11). That particular Nottingham has fallen in love with Sara Pezzini (cf. “Thanatopsis” 1.08), and this love conflicted with his fundamental loyalty to Kenneth Irons. Consequently, Nottingham prepares to have his existence ended by his creator Irons:

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<sup>190</sup> This is only true for the television narrative. The comic book Nottingham has a somewhat different background.



- Nottingham: It is written that no man can serve two masters. I thought I could prove the exception. I was mistaken.
- Irons: And now you agonize between your devotion to me and your ... passion for Sara Pezzini.  
(*Nottingham kneels before Irons, head bowed, offering him a katana. Irons stands.*)
- Nottingham: You gave me life. It's yours to take back. I would consider it a mercy.
- Irons: (*emotional*) I am not a merciful man, Ian.  
(*almost sadly*) And it is also written, 'As for this worthless slave, throw him out into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'<sup>191</sup>  
(*Irons grabs Nottingham's hair and forces the kneeling man to look up at him*)
- Irons: (*firmly*) Be gone, Ian. Your darkness awaits. ("Transcendence" 1.11)

Irons can thus not only be likened to the blood-sucking Count Dracula, but to yet another figure from gothic horror literature: Dr. Frankenstein, the unsuccessful maker of monsters whose creations can no longer be controlled once they reach the point of self-awareness. Unlike the nineteenth century scientist, though, Irons seems to have emotional ties to his creation and is thus unable or unwilling to destroy it; instead, he sends Nottingham away. From Irons' comments, however, we can assume that this incarnation of Nottingham is most certainly doomed to die. Nottingham himself is aware of the fact that he will not be the last version of Irons' helper. He leaves Irons to protect Sara, who is about to be arrested, perhaps even killed by Captain Dante and his cronies from the White Bulls society. Providing a distraction for Sara to get away, Nottingham is shot several times. Before he dies he telepathically projects one last thought at Sara: "If you ever see me again, Sara ... run" ("Transcendence" 1.11). This warning foreshadows the "rebirth" of Ian Nottingham later on in the episode.

When Dante informs Irons of Nottingham's death, Irons' only reaction is to instruct the police officer: "Have his [Nottingham's] remains sent to my home immediately. And I want his head kept chilled" (*ibid.*). Together with Dr. Immo, Irons creates yet another manifestation of Nottingham. Physically, this "new" Nottingham<sup>192</sup> is said to be superior to the old one, but Dr. Immo cautions, that, once again, the mental status of the creation is

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<sup>191</sup> This is a line from the Bible, in the Book of Matthew 25:30, taken from the parable of the bags of gold. Three servants had received bags of gold from their master and were expected to increase the amount of gold. One servant did nothing with his gold and only returned what he had been given. So, the one bag he had received was taken from him as well and he was thrown out (cf. Matt. 25: 14-30).

<sup>192</sup> To distinguish between the "old" and the "new" incarnation of Nottingham, I will refer to them as Nottingham 1 and Nottingham 2 respectively, from now on.

difficult to control: “Psychologically, we have no idea what he is. I have grave concerns about his aggression levels” (ibid.)

Nottingham 2 only varies slightly from Nottingham 1 in appearance. Where Nottingham 1 had a beard and often wore his hair open, Nottingham 2 is clean shaven, except for a triangular shaped patch on his chin; his hair is slicked back and fastened in a tightly fixed ponytail. Perhaps even more important than the outward appearance, is the overall attitude of Nottingham. Whereas Nottingham 1 used to be very subservient, standing in a corner with downcast eyes, humbly awaiting his master’s orders, Nottingham 2 exudes an air of arrogance. He is confrontational and extremely self-confident. The latest version of Irons’ henchman does not come as a clean slate. The directives to protect Irons and Sara Pezzini have already been imprinted into his mental matrix. But, the new clone is aware of more than that:

Irons:	What else do you know?
Nottingham 2:	That there have been others before me. That my immediate predecessor was defective in his emotional make-up. He was soft. This deficiency cost him his usefulness, and thus his life. I know, I still have some of his memories. I know I only exist because you allow it.

Though Nottingham 2 has retained some of the memories of Nottingham 1, his behavior is very different from the person the audience has gotten to know before. Nottingham 2 proves to be extremely cruel and brutal, with strong sadistic tendencies. As a matter of fact, his desire to kill is ultimately stronger than his obedience to Irons, which results in Nottingham 2’s death during the final confrontation with Sara Pezzini.

### **Turning Back Time**

In *WB* time is more important and more powerful than life and death. In “Transcendence” power over time equals power over life and death. The episode sets up a showdown which not only provides a solution to various narratives carefully spun throughout the first season, but truly provides a “rebirth” of the complete narrative.

As mentioned above, several violent deaths have had a strong impact on Sara’s life since she encountered the Witchblade. Her partner Danny Woo was killed by the gangster boss Gallo, the same criminal who had also killed Sara’s father years before. Her lover, the Irish musician Conchobar, was stabbed by a terrorist who was wearing the Witchblade at the time. And her mentor Joe Siri, former police captain and friend of her fathers, was murdered by Bruno Dante for giving Sara some information about her father and the White

Bulls. “Transcendence” brings further deaths. When the Witchblade reveals to Sara that Kenneth Irons has been behind the White Bulls and her father’s murder, she races to Irons’ house in “1111 Faust Street.”<sup>193</sup> Sara’s partner Jake McCarthy and her friend Gabriel follow her to Iron’s property. Looking for a side entrance into the house, McCarthy runs into Nottingham 2, who seems to have expected the police officer. After a short fight, Nottingham 2 slowly strangles McCarthy with a happy smile on his face. Leaving the doors to the mansion’s back entrance wide open, as an invitation to Gabriel, Nottingham 2, carries the body inside to where Irons and Sara are talking.

When Gabriel tries to help Sara, he is overpowered by Nottingham 2. Nottingham 2 holds Gabriel by the throat, ready to break his neck at his master’s command. Gloating in his apparent success, Irons finally reveals that he was indeed the brain behind the murder of Sara’s father: “Yes, I did order James Pezzini killed. I could never let emotional attachments stand in the way of you fulfilling your ... well, *my* ... destiny” (emphasis Irons). Irons tries to use Gabriel as leverage, telling Sara “your blood in exchange for his life,” and Sara agrees. However, what follows next is, once again, the rebellion of the creation against his creator. Against Irons’ wishes, and for the pure pleasure of it, Nottingham 2 snaps Gabriel’s neck and confronts Sara. Irons has lost all control over Nottingham 2. The powerful billionaire is rapidly aging and deteriorating on a throne-like chair.

As in previous episodes, the Witchblade seems to recognize Nottingham as “family” and initially does not react to him as a threat. However, Sara firmly believes in her own power and wills the Witchblade to work. Now, the final battle between good and evil, between Sara and Nottingham 2, begins. To add a degree of timelessness to this struggle, the creators use rapidly changing color schemes and fast editing of images. Resembling the first fight of Sara using the Witchblade in the pilot episode of the series, short cuts and strobing lights are utilized to create an atmosphere of disorientation. The vision-like quality of the scene is emphasized when both Sara and Nottingham 2 switch in appearance between their regular street clothes and the mysterious medieval plate armor which has been used as a signifier of the wielder’s ancient heritage in various episodes.

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<sup>193</sup> The number 11 has played a significant role in previous episodes of the show, e.g. Sara encounters the Witchblade on 11/11/2000. That Irons lives in “Faust Street” is also significant. Irons, like Faust, strives for knowledge and power and has lost his soul in the pursuit of the Witchblade and the artefacts powers. Though Sara Pezzini is most certainly no innocent maiden, such as Gretchen in the Faustian tale, she ultimately proves to be the downfall of Irons.

However, this armor is not merely a vision or a dream. When Sara manages to stab Nottingham 2 with the Witchblade and wound him fatally, she takes off her very real helmet to confront Irons, the dying wizard on his throne. The audience might expect Sara to kill Irons now, to slay the dragon who has threatened her life and her community, but instead Sara simply turns to walk away. This behavior illustrates not only the heroic character of Sara in an archetypal and mythological context, but also Sara's role as a model for an upright citizen and police officer. To kill in self-defense is accepted, to kill an apparently helpless old man, criminally evil or not, would be seen as a horrendous act.

Irons, on the other hand, is desperate and has no scruples or moral qualms whatsoever. He drives a dagger into Sara's back when she turns away from him, and crawls toward where she has fallen, to obtain some of her blood. The moment Sara is stabbed, a number of images flash over the screen in quick succession: there is an image of space and a star exploding, as well as several psychedelic images of swirly objects in space. Sara thus no longer represents a simple police detective, or even a superhero with a magical artifact, but instead she transcends her own humanity and becomes the force that controls the universe:

All forms of all the worlds, whether terrestrial or divine, reflect the universal force of a single inscrutable mystery: the power that constructs the atom and controls the orbits of the stars. The font of life is the core of the individual, and within himself he [the archetypal hero] will find it – if he can tear the coverings away (Campbell, *Hero* 191).

Having torn away the coverings of mundane life, Sara receives supernatural aid to decide what to do next. She hears the voice of her “grandmother,” Elizabeth Bronte: “Behold Sara, time runs both ways. Remember everything you’ve learned, my dear. Time is elastic, fluid, flexible, reversible. Use it!” (“Periculum,” 1.07). A mysterious man appears in clothes that could be taken as ancient Asian garb, perhaps shamanistic in nature. This man has, in fact, appeared in every episode of the first season, e.g., as a groundskeeper of the cemetery, where Danny Woo was buried, or a street cleaner, a janitor, or something similarly unobtrusive. The audience now learns that he is called Lazar.<sup>194</sup> His function is that of a guardian “at the entrance to the zone of magnified power” (Campbell, *Hero* 77) who discloses Sara's power to change the universe. The gate at which Sara has symbolically arrived stands for “the limits of the hero's present sphere, of life horizon. Beyond them is darkness, the unknown and danger [...] and beyond the protection of his

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<sup>194</sup> The resemblance between “Lazar” and the biblical “Lazarus,” the man brought back from the dead by Christ, is striking.

society, danger to the members of the tribe” (Campbell, *Hero* 77f.) Lazar cautions Sara that her power is not without its costs: “This is a power which can be used only once. It comes with a price of a great pain. If you choose to take this journey, you will remember very little”. However, for the archetypal hero to overcome the dangers for her community it is necessary to challenge and break through the confines of expected and accepted boundaries.

Sara pulls the dagger from her back and defiantly licks off the blood which Irons so desperately craves in front of the old man’s eyes. One last time Irons tries to bribe Sara with his knowledge of the Witchblade and its history.

Irons:           (*desperate*) I will tell you everything.  
Sara:           (*determined*) I will find out for myself.

Sara knows that her own strength, in combination with the Witchblade, is more than Irons could ever give her. She chooses to change her own destiny (cf. Uslaner 446, 448), and with that, the destiny of the whole world, perhaps even the whole universe. Sara activates the Witchblade which means that she, quite literally, rips apart time and space. This action is powerfully visualized with Sara holding up the Witchblade and lightning striking the blade. Lightning here signifies both the point of disruption, and the power of creation.<sup>195</sup>

In this instant, Sara transcends her mortal limitation and becomes a force akin to a god:

Finally, the mind breaks the bounding sphere of the cosmos to a realization transcending all experiences of form – all symbolizations, all divinities: a realization of the ineluctable void (Campbell, *Hero* 190).

The images heralding the change of the universe show Sara as a supernatural being standing outside of this world, looking onto the planet and directing its course.

At this point, time is reversed. This is shown by the film simply being run backwards. Several sequences from “Transcendence” and previous episodes “unhappen,” such as Gabriel’s and Jake’s death, but also the other deaths, until the first death Sara had experienced while wearing the Witchblade: that of her partner Danny Woo. The final episode of the first season ends by restaging one of the first scenes from the pilot episode, in which Sara and Danny stake out the gangster boss Gallo. However, instead of following

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<sup>195</sup> Once again we can see imagery from gothic horror fiction. In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the electricity provided by lightning jolts the creation of Dr Frankenstein to life. The lightning striking the Witchblade is also reminiscent of Michaelangelo’s painting “The Creation of Adam,” where the touch of God, a supernatural power, bestows the gift of life to man. This image was shown in the “Pilot Episode,” at the precise moment Sara and the Witchblade artifact connected for the first time.

Gallo into the theater where Danny got shot in the pilot episode, Sara now decides to leave: “Something feels off, Danny. Let’s get outta here. We’ve got time on our side.” Thus, everything that happened in the first season of the show can be told again, but differently, this time. Time and death have been overcome, even if this miracle can never be repeated again.

“Transcendence” thus offers very different notions of death and rebirth from any of the other shows we have looked at so far. Renewal does not necessarily have to be something positive, instead with rebirth the die is cast again and everything is open to re-structuring and re-interpretation. Nevertheless, this ending of the first season of *WB* can also be seen as the ultimate expression of optimism. If optimists believe in being able to change their own destiny for the better (cf. Uslander 448) then Sara, changing the whole world, exponentiates this belief to an ultimate truth.

## Conclusion

Narratives of Death and Rebirth are strongly interconnected with notions of optimism in *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*. Death, whether of a main protagonist or a recurring character, is always used to challenge the heroes’ agency and inspire them to protect or save their communities from contemporary anxieties and threats. To that end, a rebirth, be it spiritual or very physical is required.

In the three series, death is a trial which has to be undergone by the hero to restore peace and order to the society. However, success of the hero is only possible, if hard work is invested. The idea that an individual’s hard work will eventually lead to a positive outcome is rooted firmly in the Protestant work ethic which has been a key cultural concept within the American nation since its very inception. Furthermore, the ardent belief that a person is able to control his or her own destiny if only enough effort is put into their actions is a typical facet of an unfaltering American optimism (cf. Uslander 448, Croly 3).

When death is a topic, the images and language visualizing the narrative are often connected to Christian religion. Heaven and hell, angels and demons are symbols to translate the hero’s journey to a Western audience. Whereas religious terms have, for some part, become secularized in Western and American culture, the deeply held beliefs in the validity of Christian principles, are nevertheless very prominent. This is particularly the case when the target audience is made up primarily of families, as it is in the case of *XWP*.

Veering away from the idea of rugged individualism and traditional patterns of the archetypal hero, the modern hero acquires strength from close relationships with friends

and family. Being connected to them and accepting their help in reaching an aim, is a particular strength of the contemporary (female) hero. While this dependence on community may suggest a turn from individualist ideals in American culture, the ideal of fighting for “the greater good”<sup>196</sup> and the community, emphasize a particular type of communitarianism in American society, where individuals work together to achieve communal goals in the public sphere. The optimistic aim of such endeavors is always the chance at a good life, a happy community and a better future.

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<sup>196</sup> A term often used in *XWP*, and as a general notion, e.g., fighting for the benefit of society, also prominent in *BrVS* and *WB*.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

Between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s we have seen an unprecedented increase of female action heroes as protagonists of enormously successful shows on American television. Heroes, such as Xena of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Buffy Summers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Sara Pezzini of *Witchblade* have since then become a popular and affirmative staple of American television entertainment.

Coinciding with the appearance of these female action heroes, one can also observe a growing fascination with mythological topics, supernatural elements and ancient archetypes which have been premises to numerous American television series over the past 20 years. However, while making use of ancient mythologies – be it *XWP* and its backdrop of Greek and Roman cultures, or *BtVS*'s vampire folklore – all of these shows are distinctly American in nature. The images on the screen may show Greek gods, vampires and demons, but the narratives are firmly placed in a context of American history and culture. Key cultural concepts such as the American Dream, the Frontier Spirit, or Puritan work ethic are inextricably linked to the negotiation of contemporary American values, norms and ideologies which are at the heart of the television programs analyzed in this study. The adaptation of mythological texts, symbols and elements to specifically American discourses results in an Americanization of ancient mythology and archetypes.

One of the explanations for this heightened fascination with mythology in contemporary U.S. television entertainment is a timeless desire to understand fundamentally human needs and creating individual and communal identities. In our modern day and age, where any information seems to be instantly available at the stroke of a keyboard, questions concerning complex social and cultural problems cannot be solved by a simple Google search. Instead, myth and mythology create a virtual universe in which solutions for everyday struggles of groups or societies can be tried out and negotiated free of repression (cf. Walker 4). In this regard, television narratives offer a form of “ritual compensation” (Fiske, *Television* 89), where abstract binary concepts, such as good/evil, right/wrong, are projected onto a stage accessible to everyone, with the opportunity to observe, evaluate and discuss (cf. Fiske and Hartley 18). Television characters, whether liked or disliked, provide viewers with the option to identify with or reject choices which a character makes and lives through. Discourses negotiated within the narratives of television series enable the



audience to organize their perception of both the textual and the real world, and to find their own place in their individual societies.

As many fictional characters in television programs represent archetypes, such as the hero, the wise old man, or a divine being, audiences can easily recognize and identify with them. As the archetype itself is an abstract concept impossible to present, “primordial images” (Reeves 521) or archetypal images are used to illustrate the concepts. Archetypal images appear in any culture and find expression in narrated figures that are constantly adapted and visualized by each society according to specific needs and understandings of the world at any particular time (cf. Walker 14). Each archetypal image helps to translate abstract ideas, specific concerns or anxieties within a group or community, into easily understandable texts which can then be successfully negotiated (cf. Campbell, *Portable Jung* 321 and Frye, *Anatomy* 28). For American television producers today, mythology is a vast playground from which to pluck ideas for their specific archetypal images.

## **7.1 The Americanization of Mythology and Archetypes**

Perhaps the most important archetype, not only for the television shows examined here, but for any type of narrated text discussing norms and values, is the hero figure. The mythological hero in cultural storytelling has a long tradition and moves according to certain patterns, which Joseph Campbell has identified in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. While the myths and legends Campbell examined featured predominately male hero figures, female action heroes such as Xena, Buffy and Sara Pezzini of modern American television shows, are also constructed very much based on these patterns in order to establish the protagonists as easily and universally identifiable hero figures.

The hero figure is so crucial, because she is the representative for a particular society or group at a specific time. She is a blank screen onto which contemporary anxieties or fears can be projected and then dealt with. Thus, heroes function as cultural troubleshooters, presenting conflicted discourses and becoming conduits for producing a “common social understanding of new social conditions” (Breen and Corcoran 14). They are also exceptionally significant instruments when discussing the archetype of the Self and importance of individualism in American culture.

### **The Archetype of the Self and the Discussion of Individualism and Communitarianism**

In Jungian theory, the archetype of the Self represents the “true” personality of a human being. This Self, triggers a continual search for an identity which distinguishes a person from others while at the same time allowing her to find a distinctive place as part of a group, community, or even nation (cf. Foucault, *Technologies*). In Western terminology we usually refer to this search for one’s “true self” as the notion of self-actualization which is deemed highly desirable for a happy and content life. In *XWP*, *BtVS*, and *WB*, the Self, and the quest for self-actualization by the protagonists, are used to discuss notions of happiness, self-confidence, individualism and communitarianism in contemporary American society.

Turner’s Frontier Thesis, as well as Emerson’s philosophies have long promoted the American character as strong and self-reliant with an unfailing talent for adaptation to new surroundings and new challenges. However, other scholars have pointed out an underlying altruism, a sense of community and a desire for interpersonal harmony, especially when

working towards communal goals (cf. Bellah), as a strong motivational force for American self-identity.

In the three television series, this conflict is played out by each of the protagonists. All three heroes have to find and accept their “true” selves, before they can become part of a larger group or society, successfully working towards shared benefits and finding personal happiness in their lives. Xena, from *XWP*, has to find a balance between her “dark side,” which makes her ruthless but powerful, and the hero she craves to be, in order to make amends for a violent past and be accepted by those people who used to be afraid of her. Buffy Summers in *BtVS* struggles to negotiate her unwelcomed status as a superhero, the Slayer, with a desire to be a normal teenager and high school student. Eventually, Buffy is able to acknowledge the importance of her heroism for society and finds fulfilment in defending her friends and her community. Finally, Sara Pezzini of *WB* is initially on a quest to find the murderer of her father. Through her encounter with the Witchblade artifact, however, she realizes that she has a more difficult destiny. Sara is given the task to “heal” an entire world that suffers from insanity. Once she has passed the Witchblade’s *Periculum*, a trial to prove her worthiness, and accepts her responsibilities towards humanity, Sara is able to find purpose in her life as an individual within the society surrounding her.

All the protagonists can be seen as Frontier characters, living in worlds with supernatural creatures and occurrences. However, rugged individualism is no longer understood as a trait which isolates the hero character from her environment, but self-actualization and the acceptance of her individuality are prerequisites for living a happy and contented life, both as an individual and as a member of their respective communities.

### **The Archetype of the Shadow and the Negotiation of Justice and Retribution**

In order to discuss such complex issues as justice, punishment, revenge, and forgiveness, American television creators often use the archetype of the Shadow, represented by a specific nemesis figure. Television audiences today can easily recognize patterns of negotiating notions of law and righteousness, as crime dramas and similar shows are a staple of American television entertainment. Those inform viewers about law enforcement procedures as they are interpreted by television narratives (cf. Lee 1).

The concept of justice, however, is not only highly complex, but also very dynamic, and varies with societies and their (sometimes unwritten) rules concerning behavior (cf. Flax 335). Justice may focus on the punishment of a perpetrator for breaking the rules of the

community or, more recently, on repairing harm to the victim and offering restorative justice (cf. Olson and Dzur 142). In this context, the notion of vigilante justice must also be considered. Vigilante justice has a firm place in American culture and can be traced back to the Frontier, where federal laws did not exist and communal rules were dominant. But even in modern societies vigilante justice can be deemed necessary if the authorities cannot be trusted to satisfy the desire of the community for punishment (cf. Zimring 89). Bearing in mind a combination of traditional distrust of a government that is too powerful and an often biblical understanding of justice as “an eye for an eye,” vigilante justice thus frequently seems to be the only satisfactory option for executing “the will of the people” (ibid.).

Discussions of justice are facilitated when the protagonist of a show meets her nemesis, a representation of the archetype of the Shadow. Often, this nemesis is intimately connected to the hero (cf. Grey 301). As a personification of repressed, unwanted, and uncomfortable thoughts and emotions, the Shadow, or the nemesis, openly portrays anxieties which need to be overcome by the hero. Accordingly, when dealing with the nemesis, the hero does not only struggle for herself, but for the will and the benefit of the community.

Exploring *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*, we have seen that binaries such as good and evil, black and white, righteous and villainous have become progressively vague. As Bainbridge has remarked when suggesting that “actions can be good but illegal and legal but evil” (460) heroes and villains both tend to have virtuous and vile characteristics.

Each of the three selected series demonstrates a clear support for the established American legal system, but also endorses “vigilante” justice distributed by the superhero, once the authorities are unable to deal with a threat to the community. For example, Buffy needs to punish three young, thoroughly human men who use magic to commit crimes. With the introduction of the supernatural element, the police are longer capable of enforcing justice. Consequently, the Slayer has to decide which punishment is adequate. While Buffy herself endeavors to capture her self-declared nemeses and taking them to the police, her friend Willow advocates the death penalty as a form of restorative justice for the murder of her girlfriend Tara and for wounding Buffy fatally.<sup>197</sup> Eventually, it is up to the viewer to decide which conviction to favor.

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<sup>197</sup> After Buffy has been shot, Willow magically extricates the bullet from Buffy’s body and heals her. Otherwise, the Slayer would have died.

The narrative of Xena's nemesis Callisto, who has styled herself after the former warlord, discusses two variations of dispensing justice. At first, Xena captures Callisto and takes her to prison. Later, when Callisto escapes and begins killing people close to Xena, the Warrior Princess decides to let Callisto die, when she could have saved her nemesis' life. Concepts which inform the negotiation of justice and punishment in *XWP* are guilt, revenge, and forgiveness. The show is strongly influenced by Christian religion and mythology, to a point where passages from the Bible are quoted only thinly veiled. With *XWP*'s target audience being families, the continuous use of Christian imagery and terminology hints at the power of Christian belief systems as decisive factors for an understanding of justice in contemporary American culture and society.

Sara Pezzini is intimately, almost physically, connected to her nemesis Kenneth Irons, as the Witchblade artifact enables Irons to experience Sara's emotions. With this knowledge Irons attempts to manipulate Sara and control the powers of the Witchblade himself. However, the multi-billionaire is not only an immediate threat to Sara, but to society in general. His character represents the helplessness many Americans today feel when it comes to the union of government hubris and corporate greed. Bringing Irons to justice is exceptionally difficult as his power, a direct result from his wealth, elevates him to a social status where he seems to be untouchable by the laws governing common social behavior. As a superhero, Sara therefore has to become the law to achieve justice for society (cf. Bainbridge 463). Thus, she not only symbolizes the American legal system, being an upright police officer, but also social justice, in her role as a superhero. The eventual elimination of Irons can be interpreted as a form of restorative justice, his death pays for the deaths he was responsible for (among which were Sara's father, her partner, and several good friends), the only satisfactory form of compensation to society (cf. Messer, Baumer and Rosenfeld 559).

The Shadow figure, as represented by the nemesis character, serves to detect ethical and moral norms which are at work in contemporary society. Depending on how the hero interacts with the enemy, the audience can decide which moral standards are desirable for them at this particular moment in time. The viewers need to consider the boundaries of traditional support for the established social laws and the approval of restorative, yet vigilante justice.

### **The Myth of Death and Rebirth**

In mythology, the cycle of death and rebirth is usually understood as a metaphor for a positive renewal. Here, death is an important stage in the circle of life of a community or a whole people. It is an event associated with hope, transformation, regeneration and a better future. In modern societies, death has become a taboo subject, especially in the United States where the idea of being young, healthy and attractive has become synonymous with being successful and happy. Science is supposed to help achieve this end. Consequently, it is not surprising that the seeming omnipotence of science and the question of whether the end indeed justifies the means are discussed in the three television series examined here.

In *XWP*, *BtVS* and *WB*, narratives of death and rebirth are regularly linked to optimism, informed by the ideas of Puritan work ethic: if you work hard, you will reap a reward. In this context, the idea that one is ultimately able to control his or her own destiny is considered an essential truth.

Though each of the protagonists in the series' either dies or comes close to dying, this does not mean that control over their destiny stops there. Death seems to be a close companion to all the main characters in the three series. However, deaths of dear friends, family, or even their own deaths, are always an inspiration to the heroes to take action and strive for a rebirth, be it spiritual, or very physical.

When Xena and Gabrielle are killed in *XWP*, the narrative employs Christian imagery, such as angels and demons, heaven and hell, to give the audience a frame of reference to make the events more easily relatable. Both protagonists have to face and fight seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their quest to be together in their afterlives. Salvation, and eventually rebirth, however, can only be achieved by fighting for their goals and never giving up on each other. As seen above, *XWP* strongly supports Christian ideology by proposing "love" as the only viable option for finding peace and fulfillment. If peace and happiness can only be gained by engaging in battles, the methods used in this struggle define a strict coding of what is considered "right" and "wrong" in a society. Killing demons, for example, who represent the notion of "evil" is quite alright, whereas the violent death of angels, who symbolize "goodness," is considered a crime.

Though optimism is more obscure and harder to pinpoint in the narratives dealing with death in *BtVS*, there are several instances where we can observe the struggle for a better future being successful. After Buffy has died for the first time, she quips "I may be dead, but I'm still pretty" ("Prophecy Girl," 1.11). She has returned from death to fight for her friends and community and has become stronger than ever. The second instance in which

Buffy comes back from her grave is less positively connoted. Returning from a peaceful and happy existence in “heaven,” Buffy is thrown back into the violence and hardships of being the Slayer, as well as having to carry the burden of parental and financial responsibility for her younger sister and their home. The way back to happiness is long and hard and filled with many battles, both on a personal level, and her immediate environment. However, as Buffy does not give up and keeps on fighting, she eventually finds serenity in her relationship with family and friends.

In *WB* death is merely another form of existence. Life and death are not mutually exclusive, but defined by a presence in divergent temporal spaces. Therefore, communication with deceased friends and family, facilitated by the Witchblade artifact, is relatively simple. With death de-mystified, Sara Pezzini displays a relentless determination to bring criminals to justice and “heal” this world. This optimistic approach of being in control of her own destiny (cf. Uslaner 448) culminates in the detective turning back time to give the whole world an opportunity to create a better future the second time around.

For the female hero herself, death grants an opportunity for catharsis and regeneration which is eventually shared by the society which she represents. The supernatural elements in the series’ make it possible to accept death as an instrument for transformation and progress as well as providing an anxiety-free space to consider this taboo topic.

## 7.2 Revising Gender Roles

Over the course of the last 50 years, roles for women in American television entertainment have developed from portraying funny housewives to emancipated protagonists who save the world on a regular basis. The female action hero, by now a staple in contemporary American television entertainment, has undoubtedly influenced the way in which gender and gender roles are presented on screen, as well as the expectations of viewers concerning the equal treatment of male and female characters (cf. Gauntlett 6). Before the 1990s, a woman, successfully engaging in physical combat was an exception and might have sparked discussions about inappropriately masculine behavior. Today, expert fighting skills do not diminish the femaleness of a warrior woman. On the contrary, physical prowess is considered attractive and sexy. Of course, the aesthetic standards to which action heroes are held by today's audiences have changed, as well. An action hero has to look the part, i.e., fit and muscular, whether male or female. On television, as much as in contemporary society, the codification of the body has become a crucial factor in the creation of identity. It needs to be pointed out, however, that mere physical strength does not make a hero. The hero needs to display a combination of strength, agility, dexterity, and cunning, and ideally, should have a good sense of humor to make him or her more human and relatable. As such, the hero figure has become increasingly complex. Emotional depth of a character is essential, as the viewers will form stronger attachments to such a person and support the popularity of a show by actively engaging with it via the Internet and social media.<sup>198</sup> This is true for male and female characters. Where women on the screen have evolved into strong characters, men have also become multifaceted. Gauntlett has proposed that with the rise of strong women, men have sought new roles as well which were often connected to notions of fatherhood and paternal caring (65). In the selected shows we have several of such male characters who are strong, but at the same time caring and nurturing. Rupert Giles of *BtVS*, acts as a father towards Buffy and her friends. He represents the archetype of the wise old man, who often finds solution for demonic threats in his books. Though Giles is a better researcher than fighter, he is shown to engage in physical combat, if necessary. Xander Harris, one of Buffy's best friends, is

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<sup>198</sup> At times, involvement with a show is strongly interactive. For example, when *XWP* fan-fiction writer Melissa Good was called on by the producers to write the scripts for two episodes of the series. Or when more than 95.000 fans of the television series *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) collected more than five million dollars in an incredibly successful *Kickstarter* campaign, to see their heroes brought back as a movie on the big screen, seven years after the show had ended.



described as “the heart” of the group, keeping them connected and grounded in the “real” world (cf. “Primeval” 4.21). Xander’s bravery reveals itself not so much in the ability to fight demons, but in voicing his emotional ties to his friends. His deep love to his friend Willow enables him to save the world from destruction, when the actual hero, Buffy, does not have the power to do so (cf. “Grave” 6.22.). In *WB*, Sara’s partner Danny Woo is known to be an excellent martial arts fighter, but his role in the narrative, especially after he is killed in the pilot episode of the show, is to provide emotional support and insight to Sara, to help her on her quests. These are only a few examples how the depiction of gender on contemporary American television has changed. I think that the function of a character in a series today is largely independent of their gender. This point is further supported when we consider that contemporary female action heroes are constructed using the same patterns which Campbell described for the almost exclusively male archetypal hero (cf. *Hero with a Thousand Faces*). This fact underscores the timelessness of the hero figure and its necessity to negotiate values and belief systems in any society. Whether in ancient Greece or Southern California at the turn of the millennium, the questions which trouble humankind are very much the same. Questions of life and death, justice and injustice, revenge and forgiveness have had their place in human societies for several millennia and modern American television series are simply a contemporary medium for discussing these problems.

Television shows with female action hero protagonists often create a female centered universe in which to tell their stories. Both *XWP* and *BtVS* feature principally female characters as protagonists and antagonists of their shows. Women demand and take agency, and whenever this agency is denied by traditional, patriarchal power structures, the female protagonists reclaim the right to make decisions about their lives through mental and physical struggles. But even in *WB*, where patriarchal power structures are firmly in place, these power structures are shown as immoral, such as the organization of corrupt (male) police officers of the “White Bulls”. Change for the better can only be brought about by a woman: Sara Pezzini. The Witchblade artifact, which endows its wielder with supernatural powers, can only be worn by women, as they are considered stronger and more resilient than men (cf. “Periculum” 1.07). Indeed, traditional notions of men as the more powerful sex, or as a *pater familias* do not exist in either of the series.

In all three shows the father figure is absent. Buffy’s parents are divorced, and her father lives somewhere abroad with his new partner. He is so unimportant to the narrative and the main protagonist that he does not even make an appearance at the funeral of

Buffy's mother. Of course, the Slayer's watcher, Giles acts as a father figure for the young woman, but this fatherhood is one based on choice and acceptance. It is not a biological imperative. *XWP* mentions Xena's father once or twice, but overall it is never quite clear whether her father was indeed a mere human or possibly Ares, God of War. It is, however, also not important, as Xena's relationship with her mother is given much more significance and narrative space in the series. Sara Pezzini's adoptive father, James Pezzini, has been murdered before the events of the series take place. Though he has had a strong influence on the character development of Sara, her father only appears in short flashbacks throughout the show. In contrast, the storyline, in which Sara discovers that her grandmother was another wielder of the Witchblade and is, at the time of the series, held by Irons in cryogenic stasis, to be drained of her blood which keeps Irons young, is given a lot of attention. Though the three series do not create a matriarchal society, patriarchy is not a predominant concept in either narrative universe.

Nevertheless, motherhood is a topic which marks a difference in narratives of male and female action heroes. In this respect, biological differences influence narrative decisions. Not only is the mother figure in all three shows distinctly more important than the father figure, but both Xena and Buffy act as mothers at some point of the series. Xena gives birth to a daughter, Eve, who is not conceived through a man, but the (female) angel Callisto. Buffy takes on maternal responsibilities for her sister Dawn. Dawn was also not conceived in any traditional way, but formed in a magical ritual from a ball of pure energy. In both cases, motherhood is shown to be a problematic, but invariably strengthening process for the protagonists.

Another variation from traditional male centered narratives is that the protagonists, especially in *BtVS* and *XWP*, draw their strength from relationships with others, be it friends or family. In *WB*, though to a slightly lesser extent, this is also the case. These relationships do not necessarily have to be exclusively with other women. Whereas Xena's closest companion is female, Buffy depends on her friends Willow and Xander both, to back her up and provide a social anchor for her. Sara Pezzini is not shown to have strong bonds with other female characters; however, she receives moral and emotional support from her former partner and friend Danny Woo. The characters grow and change through their relationship with others and their experiences in this world (cf. Heineken 131), which is evidence that identity is something that is continuously shifting and evolving. At the same time it might also hint at the impossibility of successfully navigating the world of today alone and a strengthening of the importance of community.

Summarizing we can say that gender does not influence narratives of action heroes in modern television programs very much. There might be some varieties concerning the topics of the storylines, but in terms of construction of hero figures, as well as heroic actions, both physically and mentally, gender is not a decisive factor.

### **7.3 The Future of the Hero**

When we examine the protagonists' dependence on relationships with friends and family, I believe we observe a general shift in contemporary American social structures and value systems. Where for centuries the family, the immediate community and the church were among the primary frames of reference in which individuation and identity formation took place, modern society has become much more diverse. Friends often act as substitutes for family and specific interest groups – often on the Internet – replace a neighborhood or a religious community. Religious communities still exist, of course, but the variety of choices has grown immensely. Consequently, identity formation today is more a result of individual selection than ever before.

For the modern action hero in U.S. television entertainment this means that gender is only one small part of the individuation process. Indeed, I would suggest that the contemporary American action hero, whether male or female, heralds the advance of a new hero figure: the performative hero (the term “performative” being borrowed from Butler and *Gender Trouble*). The performative hero is conscious about his/her emotional framework and relies on relationships with others to find an individual and social identity. Individuality is crucial to be a successful and effective part of a community, but identity, is constantly shifting, arranged and re-defined. Sexual and gender identity is only one facet, among many others, of personal development.

In order to try out these ideas of performativity in the pursuit of identity, science-fiction, fantasy, magical realism and supernatural environments of television series provide an ideal background. Though contemporary social and cultural dilemmas and anxieties in American communities, such as substance abuse, domestic violence, single parenting, etc., can be presented very clearly, the universe in which they appear is distanced from reality and consequently less threatening to the viewer. In the modern United States, in which society is constantly and rapidly changing, where the necessity to adapt to new technologies, new cultural and social structures, is crucial for survival, mythology and archetypes allow the modern woman and the modern man to safely position themselves within the long history of humankind.

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## Filmography

7th Heaven. Creator: Brenda Hampton. Perf. Stephen Collins, Beverley Mitchell, Catherine Hicks, Jessica Biel. Prod. Spelling Television, 1996-2007.

Alias. Creator: J.J. Abrams. Perf. Jennifer Garner, Ron Rifkin, Carl Lumbly, Kevin Weisman, Victor Garber. Prod. Touchstone Television/Bad Robot, 2001-2006.

Alien. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Sigourney Weaver, Tom Skerritt, Harry Dean Stanton, John Hurt, Ian Holm, Yaphet Kotto. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1979.

Angel. Creator: Joss Whedon. Perf. David Boreanaz, Alexis Denisof, Charisma Carpenter, J. August Richards, Amy Acker. Prod. Mutant Enemy/20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1999-2004.

As the World Turns. Creator: Ina Phillips. Perf. Terri Conn, Maura West, Michael Park. Prod. Procter & Gamble Productions/Columbia Broadcasting System/TeleNext Media, 1956-2010.

A-Team, The. Creators: Stephen J. Cannell, Frank Lupo. Perf. George Peppard, Dwight Schultz, Mr.T, Dirk Benedict. Prod. Stephen J. Cannell Productions/Universal TV, 1983-1987.

Babylon 5. Creator: J. Michael Straczynski. Perf. Mira Furlan, Bruce Boxleitner, Jerry Doyle, Claudia Christian, Richard Biggs. Prod. Babylonian Productions, 1994-1998.

Ben Hur. Dir. William Wyler. Perf. Charlton Heston, Stephen Boyd, Jack Hawkins, Haya Harareet. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959.

Bewitched. Creator: Sol Sacks. Perf. Elizabeth Montgomery, Dick York, Agnes Moorehead, Larry Tate. Prod. Ashmont Prod./Screen Gems Television, 1964-1972.

Bionic Woman, The. Creator: Kenneth Johnson. Perf. Lindsay Wagner, Richard Anderson, Martin E. Brooks. Prod. Harve Bennett Productions/Universal TV, 1976-1978.

Birds of Prey. Creator: Adam Armus, Nora Kay Foster, Adam Horowitz, Edward Kitsis. Perf. Ashley Scott, Dina Meyer, Rachel Skarsten. Prod. Warner Bros. Television/DC Entertainment, 2002.

Bold and Beautiful, The. Creator: Lee Phillip Bell, William J. Bell. Perf. Katherine Kelly Lang, Ronn Moss, Susan Flannery, John McCook. Prod. Bell-Phillip Television Productions/BellaSwartz Productions/ Big Chief Films, 1982-present.

Bonanza. Creator: David Dortort, Fred Hamilton. Perf. Lorne Greene, Michael Landon, Dan Blocker, Pernell Roberts. Prod. NBC, 1959-1973.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Creator: Joss Whedon. Perf. Sarah Michelle Gellar, Alyson Hannigan, Anthony Head, Nicholas Brendon. Prod. Mutant Enemy, et. al., 1997-2003.

Cagney & Lacey. Creators: Barbara Avedon, Barbara Corday. Perf. Tyne Daly, Sharon Glass, Al Waxman, John Karlen. Prod. CBS, et.al., 1981-1988.

Charlie' Angels. Creators: Ivan Goff, Ben Roberts. Perf. Kate Jackson, Farrah Fawcett, Jaclyn Smith, David Doyle, John Forsythe. Prod. Spelling-Goldberg Productions, 1976-1981.

*Clash of the Titans*. Dir. Desmond Davis. Perf. Harry Hamlin, Laurence Olivier, Maggie Smith, Judy Bowker. MGM, 1981.

*CSI: Crime Scene Investigations*. Creators: Ann Donahue, Anthony E. Zuiker. Perf. William Pertersen, Marg Helgenberger, George Eads, Jorja Fox. Prod. CBS Productions, et.al., 2000 – present.

*CSI: Miami*. Creators: Ann Donahue, Carol Medelsohn, Anthony E. Zuiker. Perf. David Caruso, Emily Procter, Adam Rodriguez. Prod. CBS Paramount Network Television, et.al., 2002 – present.

*CSI: NY*. Creators: Ann Donahue, Carol Medelsohn, Anthony E. Zuiker. Perf. Gary Sinise, Melina Kanakaredes, Carmine Giovinazzo, Hill Harper, Eddi Cahill, Anna Belknap. Prod. CBS Productions, et.al, 2004 – present.

*Days of Our Lives*. Creators: Ted Corday, Irna Phillips, Allan Chase. Perf. Deidre Hall, John Aniston, Josh Taylor. Prod. Corday Productions, et. al., 1968-2012.

*Desperate Housewives*. Creator: Marc Cherry. Perf. Teri Hatcher, Felicity Huffman, Marcia Cross, Eva Longoria. Prod. Cherry Alley Productions, et. al., 2004-2012.

*Die Hard*. Dir. John McTiernan. Perf. Bruce Willis, Alan Rickman, Bonnie Bedelia. Prod. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1988.

*Ellen*. Creators: Carol Black, Neal Marlens, David S. Rosenthal. Perf. Ellen DeGeneres, David Anthony Higgins, Joely Fisher. Prod. Black-Marlens Company, et.al., 1994-1998.

*Ellen DeGeneres Show, The*. Creator: Ellen DeGeneres. Perf. Ellen DeGeneres. Prod. A Very Good Production / Telepictures Productions, 2003 – present.

*Fall Guy, The*. Creator: Glen A. Larson. Perf. Lee Majors, Douglas Barr, Heather Thomas. Prod. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television / Glen A. Larson Productions, 1981-1986.

*First Blood* (Rambo I). Dir. Ted Kotcheff. Perf. Sylvester Stallone, Brian Dennehy, Richard Crenna. Prod. Anabasis N.V. / Elcajo Productions, 1982.

*Friends*. Creators: David Crane, Mara Kauffman. Perf. Jennifer Aniston, Courteney Cox, Lisa Kudrow, Matt LeBlanc, Matthew Perry, David Schwimmer. Prod. Warner Bros Television, et.al, 1994-2004.

*Golden Girls, The*. Creator: Susan Harris. Perf. Bea Arthur, Betty White, Rue McClanahan, Estelle Getty. Prod. Touchstone Television, et.al., 1985-1992.

*Gunsmoke*. Creators: Norman Macdonnel, John Meston. Perf. James Arness, Milburn Stone, Amanda Blake, Ken Curtis. Prod. Arness Production Company / CBS, 1955-1975.

*Hercules: Legendary Journeys*. Creator: Christian Williams. Perf. Kevin Sorbo, Michael Hurst, Kevin Smith. Prod. MCA Television, et. al., 1995-1999.

*Highlander*. Creator: Gregory Widen. Perf. Adrian Paul, Stan Kirsch, Jim Byrnes. Prod. Davis-Panzer Productions / Filmline International / Gaumont Télévision, 1992-1998.

- I Dream of Jeannie*. Creator: Sidney Sheldon. Perf. Barbara Eden, Larry Hagman, Bill Daily, Hayden Rorke. Prod. Screen Gems Television/Sidney Sheldon Productions, 1965-1970.
- I Love Lucy*. Creators: Bob Carroll Jr., Madelyn Davis. Perf. Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, Vivian Vance, William Frawley. Prod. Desilu Productions, 1951-1957.
- Knight Rider*. Creator: Glen A. Larson. Perf. David Hasselhoff, Edward Mulhare, Richard Basehart, Patricia McPherson. Prod. Glen A. Larson Productions / Universal TV, 1982-1986.
- L Word, The*. Creators: Michele Abbott, Ilene Chaiken, Kathy Greenberg. Perf. Jennifer Beals, Laurel Holloman, Leisha Hailey, Katherine Moennig, Mia Kirshner. Prod. Showtime, 2004-2009.
- La Femme Nikita*. Creator: Joel Surnow. Perf. Peta Wilson, Don Francks, Eugene Robert Glazer. Prod. CTV Television Network, et.al., 1997-2001.
- Legend of Zorro, The*. Dir. Martin Campbell. Perf. Antonio Banderas, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Rufus Sewell. Columbia Pictures, 2005.
- Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. Creators: Joe Shuster, Jerry Siegel. Perf. Dean Cain, Teri Hatcher, Lane Smith. Prod. December 3<sup>rd</sup> Productions / Lorimar Television, 1993-1997
- MacGyver*. Creator: Lee David Zlotoff. Perf. Richard Dean Anderson, Dana Elcar, Bruce McGill. Prod. Paramount Television, et.al., 1985-1992.
- Magnum, P.I.* Creator: Glen A. Larson. Perf. Tom Selleck, John Hillerman, Roger E. Mosley, Larry Manetti. Prod. Belisarius Productions / Glen A. Larson Productions / Universal TV, 1980-1988.
- Mark of Zorro, The*. Dir. Fred Niblo. Perf. Douglas Fairbanks, Marguerite DeLa Motte, Robert McKim. Douglas Fairbanks Pictures, 1920.
- Matrix, The*. Dir. Andy Wachowski, Lana Wachowski. Perf. Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne Moss, Hugo Weaving. Prod. Warner Bros. / Village Roadshow Pictures, 1999.
- Moonlighting*. Creator: Glenn Gordon Caron. Perf. Cybill Shepherd, Bruce Willis, Allyce Beasley. Prod. ABC Circle Films / Picturemaker Productions, 1985-1989.
- Murphy Brown*. Creator: Diane English. Perf. Candice Bergen, Faith Ford, Charles Kimbrough. Prod. Shukovsky English Entertainment, et. al., 1988-1998.
- My So-Called Life*. Creator: Winnie Holzman. Perf. Bess Armstrong, Wilson Cruz, Claire Danes. Prod. ABC Productions, et. al., 1994-1995.
- Nash Bridges*. Creator: Carlton Cuse. Perf. Don Johnson, Cheech Marin, Jodi Lyn O'Keefe. Prod. Don Johnson Company / Carlton Cuse Productions, 1996-2001.
- Orange is the New Black*. Creator: Jenji Kohan. Perf. Taylor Schilling, Laura Prepon, Laverne Cox. Prod. Netflix, 2013-.
- Outer Limits, The*. Creator: Leslie Stevens. Perf. Vic Perrin, Bob Johnson. Prod. United Artists Television, 1963-1965.



*Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*. Dir. Rob Marshall. Perf. Johnny Depp, Penélope Cruz, Geoffrey Rush, Ian McShane. Prod. Walt Disney Pictures / Jerry Bruckheimer Films, 2011.

*Poltergeist – The Legacy*. Creator: Richard Barton Lewis. Perf. Derek de Lint, Martin Cummins, Robbi Chong, Helen Shaver. Prod. Showtime Networks, et. al., 1996-1999.

*Profiler*. Creator: Cynthia Saunders. Perf. Ally Walker, Julian McMahon, Erica Gimpel. Prod. NBC Enterprises, et. al., 1996-2000.

*Psi-Factor: Chronicles of the Paranormal*. Creators: Peter Aykroyd, Christopher Chacon. Perf. Dan Aykroyd, Nancy Anne Sakovich, Barclay Hope. Prod. Alliance Atlantis Communications, et. al., 1996-2000.

*Queer as Folk*. Creators: Ron Cowen, Daniel Lipman. Perf. Gale Harold, Randy Harrison, Scott Lowell, Michelle Clunie, Thea Gill. Prod. Showtime Networks, et. al., 2000-2005.

*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Creator: David Collins. Perf. Ted Allen, Carson Kressley, Kyan Douglas, Thom Filicia, Jai Rodriguez. Prod. Bravo Original Production, et. al., 2003-2007.

*Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Harrison Ford, Karen Allen, Paul Freeman. Prod. Paramount Pictures / Lucasfilm, 1981.

*Remington Steele*. Creators: Robert Butler, Michael Gleason. Perf. Stephanie Zimbalist, Pierce Brosnan, Doris Roberts. Prod. MTM Enterprises, 1982-1987.

*Rocky*. Dir. John G. Avildsen. Perf. Sylvester Stallone, Talia Shire, Burt Young. Prod. Chartoff-Winkler Productions / United Artists, 1976.

*Scoobie-Doo, Where Are You?* Creators: Joe Ruby, Ken Spears, Fred Silverman. Perf. Don Messick, Casey Kasem, Frank Welker, Nikole Jaffe. Prod. Hanna-Barbera Productions, 1969-1971.

*Sex and the City*. Creator: Darren Star. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Kim Cattrall, Kristin Davis, Cynthia Nixon. Prod. HBO, 1998-2004.

*Simpsons, The*. Creator: Matt Groening. Perf. Dan Castellaneta, Nancy Cartwright, Julie Kavner, Yeardley Smith. Prod. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television, et. al., 1989-present.

*Six Feet Under*. Creator: Alan Ball. Perf. Peter Krause, Michael C. Hall, Frances Conroy, Lauren Ambrose. Prod. HBO, et. al., 2001-2005.

*Smallville*. Creators: Alfred Gough, Miles Millar. Perf. Tom Welling, Michael Rosenbaum, Allison Mack, Kristin Kreuk. Prod. Tollin / Robbins Productions, 2001-2011.

*Spider Man*. Creator: Ralph Bakshi. Perf. Paul Soles. Prod. Grantray-Lawrence Animations, 1967-1970.

*Six Million Dollar Man, The*. Perf. Lee Majors, Richard Anderson, Martin E. Brooks. Prod. Universal TV, 1974-1978.

*Stargate SG-1*. Creators: Brad Wright, Jonathan Glassner. Perf. Richard Dean Anderson, Amanda Tapping, Michael Shanks, Christopher Judge. Prod. MGM Television, et. al., 1997-2007.

- Star Trek. Creator: Gene Roddenberry. Perf. William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, DeForest Kelley, Nichelle Nichols, James Doohan, George Takei. Prod. Desilu Productions, et. al., 1966-1969.
- Star Trek: Nemesis. Dir. Stuart Baird. Perf. Patrick Stewart, Jonathan Frakes, Brent Spiner. Prod. Paramount Pictures, 2002.
- Star Trek: The Next Generation. Creator: Gene Roddenberry. Perf. Patrick Stewart, Jonathan Frakes, Gates McFadden, Brent Spiner, LeVar Burton. Prod. Paramount Domestic Television, 1987-1994.
- Star Trek: Voyager. Creators: Rick Berman, Michael Piller, Jeri Taylor. Perf. Kate Mulgrew, Robert Beltran, Robert Duncan McNeill, Jeri Ryan. Prod. Paramount Network Television, 1995-2001.
- Terminator, The. Dir. James Cameron. Perf. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Linda Hamilton, Michael Biehn. Prod. Hemdale Film / Pacific Western, 1984.
- Terminator 2: Judgement Day. Dir. James Cameron. Perf. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Linda Hamilton, Edward Furlong, Robert Patrick. Prod. Carolco Pictures, et.al., 1991.
- Twilight Zone, The. Creator: Rod Serling. Perf. Rod Serling. Prod. Cayuga Productions / CBS Productions, 1959-1964.
- Wagon Train. Creator: Virgil W. Vogel. Perf. Ward Bond, Robert Horton, John McIntire, Robert Fuller. Prod. Revue Studios / Universal TV, 1957-1965.
- Walker, Texas Ranger. Creators: Christopher Canaan, Leslie Greif, Paul Haggis, Albert S. Ruddy. Perf. Chuck Norris, Clarence Gilyard Jr., Sheree J. Wilson. Prod. Amadea Film Productions / CBS, 1993-2001.
- Will & Grace. Creators: David Kohan, Max Mutchnick. Perf. Eric McCormack, Debra Messing, Megan Mullally, Sean Hayes. Prod. KoMut Entertainment / NBC Studios, 1998-2006.
- Witchblade. Creators: Marc Silvestri, Michael Turner. Perf. Yancy Butler, David Chokachi, Anthony Cistaro, Will Yun Lee, Eric Etebary. Prod. Blade TV Productions / Top Cow Productions, 2000-2002.
- Wonder Woman. Creator: William M. Marston. Perf. Lynda Carter, Lyle Waggoner, Tom Kratochvil. Prod. Bruce Lansbury Productions, et.al., 1975-1979.
- Xena: Warrior Princess. Crator: Robert G. Tapert, John Schulian. Perf. Lucy Lawless, Renée O'Connor, Ted Raimi. Prod. MCA Television / Renaissance Pictures, et.al., 1995-2001.
- X-Files, The. Creator: Chris Carter. Perf. David Duchovny, Gillian Anderson, Mitch Pileggi. Prod. Ten Thirteen Productions / 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television, 1994-2003.
- Zorro. Creator: Johnston McCulley. Perf. Guy Williams, Gene Sheldon, Henry Clavin, George J. Lewis. Prod. Walt Disney Productions, 1957-1959.
- Zorro. Creator: Johnston McCulley. Perf. Duncan Regher, Patrice Martinez, Henry Darrow. Prod. Carrington Productions International, et.al., 1990-1993.